
THE
SACRED FLAME



A Play in Three Acts by
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL OF ACTING

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THE SACRED FLAME

By W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ASHENDEN OR THE BRITISH AGENT
THE CASUARINA TREE
THE PAINTED VEIL
ON A CHINESE SCREEN
OF HUMAN BONDAGE
THE MOON AND SIXPENCE
THE TREMBLING OF A LEAF
LIZA OF LAMBETH
MRS. CRADDOCK
THE EXPLORER
THE MAGICIAN
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND
THE LAND OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN

Plays

THE SACRED FLAME
THE LETTER
THE CONSTANT WIFE
THE CIRCLE
THE EXPLORER
MRS. DOT
A MAN OF HONOUR
PENELOPE
JACK STRAW
LADY FREDERICK
THE TENTH MAN
LANDED GENTRY
THE UNKNOWN
SMITH

THE SACRED FLAME

A Play in Three Acts

BY
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

*All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love
And feed his sacred flame.*

—COLERIDGE



London
William Heinemann, Ltd.

1929



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TO
HIS FRIEND
MESSMORE KENDALL
THE AUTHOR
DEDICATES THIS PLAY

Characters

Maurice Tabret

Dr. Harvester

Mrs. Tabret

Nurse Wayland

Alice

Major Liconda

Stella Tabret

Colin Tabret

The action takes place at Gatley House,
Mrs. Tabret's residence, near London.

The Sacred Flame: Act One

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The drawing room at Gatley House. It is a large easy room furnished comfortably in rather an old-fashioned way, with spacious chairs covered in faded chintz, great bowls of flowers, English china, Victorian water colours and photographs in silver frames. It is the drawing-room of an elderly lady who has furnished it in the way she has since her childhood known a drawing-room furnished. An interior decorator has never been inside the door. No stranger entering it would cry, How lovely! but if he were sensitive to his surroundings he might think it a very good room to eat muffins in for tea and he would slip his hand behind the cushions on the sofa in the certainty that he would find fat little lavender bags in the corners.*

It is now the height of June, the weather is very fine, and the French windows that lead into the garden are wide open. Through them you see the starry radiant night.

When the curtain rises, it discovers MAURICE and MRS. TABRET, NURSE WAYLAND, and DR. HARVESTER. MRS. TABRET is working at her tapestry. She is a slim, small, gray-haired lady, with a gentle manner,

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but her face is determined; it has a ravaged look as though fate had borne her many a blow, but also a serenity that suggests that she has found in herself the character and the courage to put up a good fight. She is dressed in semi-evening dress, in black. NURSE WAYLAND is reading a book. She is a girl of twenty-seven or so, handsome rather than pretty, with fine eyes, a little sullen, perhaps, and in her expression the hungry, somewhat pathetic look that some women have at her age. She is dressed not in uniform, but in a pretty, simple frock that sets off her fine figure.

DR. HARVESTER and MAURICE are playing chess. DR. HARVESTER is the family doctor; he is a youngish man, fresh complexioned and of an open countenance, fair, clean, and amiable. He wears a dinner jacket. MAURICE is lying on an invalid bed, in pyjamas and a bed jacket. He is trim and neat, with his hair close-cropped and his face fresh-shaven; he has a handsome head and his manner is cheerful and even hearty; but he is very thin, his cheeks are pale and hollow, and his dark eyes look enormous. But they are constantly smiling. He gives no sign of being sorry for himself.
There is a pause while the doctor considers the situation.

Maurice

(With good-humoured sarcasm.) Speed is the essence of this game, old boy?

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Harvester

Don't let the brute bully me, Mrs. Tabret.

Mrs. Tabret

(*Smiling.*) I think you're quite capable of taking care of yourself, Doctor.

Maurice

If you moved your bishop you'd make things a bit awkward for me.

Harvester

(*Imperturbably, considering the game.*) When I want your advice, I'll ask for it.

Maurice

Mother, is that the way respectable general practitioners talked to their patients in the days of your far-distant youth?

Mrs. Tabret

How on earth do you expect poor Nurse Wayland to read when you never for an instant hold your tongue? I can't even hear myself tatting.

Nurse

(*Looking up for an instant, with a pleasant smile.*) I don't mind, Mrs. Tabret, don't bother about me.

Maurice

After listening to my sprightly conversation for nearly five years Nurse Wayland pays no more attention to me than if I were a deaf mute.

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Mrs. Tabret

(*Dryly.*) Who can blame her?

Maurice

(*Cheerily.*) Even when pain and anguish wring my brow and I swear like fifty thousand troopers I never manage to bring the blush of shame to her maiden cheek.

Nurse

(*Smiling.*) I know it's exasperating.

Maurice

It's worse than that, Nurse. It's inconsiderate. It would relieve me to see you blench with horror and smother a sob of mortification in an adhesive bandage. . . . Watch the Doctor, he's about to move. Be very careful, old boy, the position is fraught with danger.

Harvester

(*Moving a piece.*) I'm going to move my knight.

Maurice

What would you say if I gave that pawn a little push and murmured check?

Harvester

I should say it was your right, but I should think it a trifle vulgar.

Maurice

Do you know what I'd do now in your place?

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Harvester

No, I don't.

Maurice

I'd catch my foot in the leg of the table and kick it over accidentally. That's the only way you can save yourself from getting the worst hiding I've ever given you.

Harvester

(*Moving a piece.*) Go to the devil.

Maurice

Oh, you do that, do you? All right.

(*ALICE, the maid, comes in.*)

Alice

If you please, ma'am, Major Liconda wants to know if it's too late for him to come in and have a drink.

Maurice

Of course not. Where is he?

Alice

He's at the door, sir.

Mrs. Tabret

Ask him to come in.

Alice

Very good, ma'am.

(*She goes out.*)

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Maurice

You know him, don't you, old boy?

Harvester

No, I've never met him. He's the fellow who's just taken that furnished house on the golf links, isn't he?

Mrs. Tabret

Yes. I knew him years ago in India. That's why he came here.

Maurice

He was one of Mother's numerous admirers. I understand that she treated him very badly.

Harvester

I can well believe it. Does he still cherish a hopeless passion for you, Mrs. Tabret?

Mrs. Tabret

(*Taking the chaff in good part.*) I don't know at all, Dr. Harvester. You'd better ask him.

Harvester

Is he a soldier?

Maurice

No, he was a policeman. He's just retired. He's a very good chap, and I believe he's rather a good golfer. Colin has played with him two or three times.

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Mrs. Tabret

I'd asked him to dine to-night so that Maurice could get a game of bridge, but he couldn't come.

(*ALICE comes in followed by MAJOR LICONDA, and, when she has announced him, goes out.*)

Alice

Major Liconda.

(*He is a tallish, middle-aged man, with gray hair and a sunburned face, spare of build, active and alert. He wears a dinner jacket.*)

Mrs. Tabret

(*Shaking hands with him.*) How d'you do? How very nice of you to look in.

Liconda

I was on my way home and saw that your lights were on, so I thought I'd just ask if anyone would like to give me a doch-an-dorris.

Mrs. Tabret

Help yourself. (*With a gesture of the head.*) The whisky's on the table.

Liconda

(*Going over to it and pouring himself out a drink.*) Thank you. How are you, Nurse?

Nurse

How do you do?

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Liconda

And the patient?

Maurice

(*Lightly.*) Bearing up pretty well considering all he has to put up with.

Liconda

(*Smiling.*) You're in your usual high spirits.

Maurice

I have much to be thankful for as the lady said when her husband was run over by a motorbus just as he was stepping out of the office after insuring his life.

Harvester

(*Laughing.*) You fool, Maurice.

Mrs. Tabret

I don't think you know Dr. Harvester.

(*The two men shake hands.*)

Harvester

How d'you do?

Liconda

Mrs. Tabret tells me you're a very good doctor.

Harvester

I take great pains to impress the fact on my patients.

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Maurice

His only serious fault is that he thinks he can play chess.

Liconda

Don't let me disturb your game.

Maurice

It's finished.

Harvester

Not at all. I have three possible moves. (*Making one.*) What do you say to that?

Maurice

Mate, you poor fish.

Harvester

Damn.

Mrs. Tabret

Have you beaten him?

Maurice

Hollow.

Nurse

Shall I put the chess things away?

Maurice

If you wouldn't mind.

(*She takes the board and the chessmen and puts them away, while the conversation proceeds.*)

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Liconda

I won't keep you up. I'll just swallow my drink and take myself off. I really only came to say I was sorry I couldn't come to dinner.

Maurice

There's no hurry, you know. I'm not going to bed for hours.

Mrs. Tabret

We're really waiting up for Stella and Colin. They've gone to the opera.

Liconda

I'm a night owl. I never go to bed till I can help it.

Maurice

You're the man for my money.

Harvester

I've got a day's work before me. I'll just have a drop of Scotch to assuage the pangs of defeat and then I must run.

Maurice

Let's send the rest of them off to bed, Major, and have a good old gossip by ourselves.

Liconda

I'm willing.

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Mrs. Tabret

If you really want to stay up, Maurice, let Nurse Wayland get you ready and then you'll only just have to slip into bed, and Colin can help you.

Maurice

All right. What do you say to that, Nurse?

Nurse

Well, it's just as you like. I'm quite prepared to stay up until Mrs. Maurice comes in. I'll put you to bed after you've said good-night to her.

Maurice

No, come on. You're looking tired.

Mrs. Tabret

You are looking a little peaked, Nurse. I think it's nearly time you had another holiday.

Nurse

Oh, I don't want a holiday for months.

Maurice

Put your shoulder to the wheel, Nurse, and gently trundle the wounded hero to his bedchamber.

Harvester

Shall I come and help?

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Maurice

Not on your life. It's bad enough to be messed about by one person. I don't want a crowd, damn it.

Harvester

Sorry.

Maurice

I shall only be ten minutes.

(NURSE WAYLAND *wheels out the bed and closes the doors behind her.*)

Liconda

She seems a very nice woman, that nurse.

Mrs. Tabret

Yes. She's extremely competent. And I must say she's very gentle and kind. Her patience is really wonderful.

Liconda

You've had her ever since poor Maurice crashed, haven't you?

Mrs. Tabret

Oh, no. We had three or four before she came. All more or less odious.

Harvester

She's a rattling good nurse. I think you're lucky to have got her.

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Mrs. Tabret

I'm sure we are. The only fault I have to find with her is that she's so very reserved. There's nothing come-hither about her. Except for her month's holiday every August she's been with us all day and every day for nearly five years, and I only just know that her name's Beatrice. She calls the boys Mr. Maurice and Mr. Colin, and Stella she calls Mrs. Maurice. She seems to be always a little on her guard. She certainly doesn't encourage familiarity.

Harvester

I can't imagine skylarking with her at a Sunday-school treat, I must admit.

Mrs. Tabret

And of course she's a little tactless. It never seems to occur to her that Maurice wants to be alone with his wife. Poor lamb, he has so little. He likes to say good-night to Stella the last thing and he likes to say it without anyone looking on. That's why he's staying up now.

Liconda

Poor old boy.

Mrs. Tabret

He can't bear the thought of going to sleep without kissing her. And Nurse Wayland always seems to find

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something to do just that last moment. He doesn't want to hurt her feelings by sending her out of the room, and he's terrified of being thought sentimental, so he uses every sort of trick and device to get her out of the way.

Harvester

But, good Lord, why don't you tell her? After all, there's no reason why a man shouldn't kiss his wife good-night if he wants to.

Mrs. Tabret

She's terribly sensitive. Haven't you noticed how often rather tactless people are? They'll stamp on your toes and then when you tuck them up out of harm's way they're so offended you feel quite miserable about it.

Liconda

I suppose Maurice is absolutely dependent upon her?

Mrs. Tabret

Absolutely. All sorts of rather unpleasant things have to be done for him, poor dear, and he can't bear that anyone should know about them. Especially Stella.

Harvester

Yes, I've discovered that. He doesn't want Stella to have anything to do with his illness.

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Liconda

(*To HARVESTER.*) Is there really no chance of his getting better?

Harvester

I'm afraid not.

Mrs. Tabret

It's a miracle that he's alive at all.

Harvester

He was terribly smashed up, you know. The lower part of his spine was broken and the plane caught fire and he was badly burnt.

Liconda

It was rotten bad luck.

Mrs. Tabret

And when you think that he was flying all through the war and never even had a mishap. It seems so silly that this should happen just when he was trying a new machine. It was so unexpected.

Liconda

It seems such a pity he didn't stop flying when he married.

Mrs. Tabret

It's easy to say that now.

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Harvester

He was a born flyer. Fellows have told me that he seemed to have a sort of instinct for it.

Mrs. Tabret

It was the one thing he was interested in. He wouldn't have given it up for anything in the world. And he was so good at it, it never occurred to me that he could have an accident, he always felt so safe.

Liconda

I've been told he was absolutely fearless.

Harvester

And you know, the strange thing is this, he's just as much interested in it all as he ever was. He follows all the important flights and the tests and so on. If anyone does a new stunt he's full of it.

Liconda

His courage amazes me. He never seems low or depressed.

Mrs. Tabret

Never. His spirits are wonderful. It's one of the most anguishing things I know to see him, when he's in pain and there are beads of sweat on his brow, force a joke from his lips.

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Harvester

I'm sorry to think Colin is going away so soon, Mrs. Tabret. I think his being here has done Maurice a lot of good.

Mrs. Tabret

When they were boys they were always great friends, and you know brothers aren't always.

Liconda

They're not, indeed.

Mrs. Tabret

And Colin has been away so long. He went to Central America just before Maurice crashed, you know.

Liconda

Well, has he got to go back?

Mrs. Tabret

He put all his share of his father's money in a coffee plantation and it's doing very well. He loves the life out there and it seems cruel to ask him to give it up to help us to look after his crippled brother.

Harvester

I think it would be very unfair. One has no right to ask anyone to give up his own chance of making the best he can of life.

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Mrs. Tabret

(*With a dry smile.*) At all events with the young one may ask, but the likelihood of their consenting is very slight.

Harvester

Not at all, Mrs. Tabret. The country is full of desiccated females who've given up their lives to taking care of an invalid mother.

Liconda

When I was at Bath a little while ago I saw a good many couples like that, and to tell you the truth I sometimes wondered why the daughters didn't murder their mothers.

Harvester

They often do. Every doctor will tell you that he's had a case where he has a strong suspicion that some old woman who lived too long has been poisoned by her relatives. But he takes jolly good care not to say anything about it.

Liconda

Why?

Harvester

Oh, it's rotten for a man's practice. Nothing can do you so much damage as to be mixed up in a murder case.

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Mrs. Tabret

I've often pondered over the problem of the woman like myself who is no longer young and suffers from indifferent health. I'm not sure if the best way of dealing with us wouldn't be to do as some African tribes do. At a certain age take us to the river's brim and push us gently but firmly in.

Liconda

(*With a smile.*) What happens if they swim?

Mrs. Tabret

The family is prepared for that. They stand on the banks with brickbats and take pot shots at their struggling but aged grandmother. It discourages her efforts to get out.

(*NURSE WAYLAND opens the door and the DOCTOR, getting up, helps her to wheel back the bed on which MAURICE is lying.*)

Maurice

Here we are again. I'm all fixed up and ready for any excitement. What about a tune on the gramophone?

Harvester

I must go.

Mrs. Tabret

And Nurse Wayland should go to bed.

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Nurse

I'll just gather my things together and say good-night. Are you sure Mrs. Maurice and your brother won't go and have supper after the opera?

Maurice

I'm sure they will. I particularly told Stella she was to have a real bust. It's not often she goes on the loose, poor dear.

Nurse

Then they won't be home till four.

Maurice

Does that mean you disapprove of my staying up, you hard and brutal woman?

Nurse

Doesn't Dr. Harvester?

Harvester

Very much. But I'm aware that Maurice has no intention of going to sleep till he knows his wife is safely home again, and my theory is that it only does people good now and then to do what they shouldn't.

Liconda

That is the kind of doctor for me.

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Harvester

Hurry up and get a nice long lingering illness, will you, so that I can put down a hard court in my garden.

Liconda

I'll see what I can do about it.

Maurice

(*Pricking up his ears.*) What's that?

Mrs. Tabret

What, Maurice?

Maurice

I thought I heard a car. Yes, by jove. It's Stella. I'd know the sound of that car in a thousand.

(*Now the sound of a car driving up is almost distinct.*)

Liconda

Do you mean to say you can hear from this distance?

Maurice

You bet your life I can. That's the family bus. Now just stay a minute and see Stella, Doctor. She's got her best bib and tucker on and she's a sight for sore eyes.

Liconda

What were they giving at the opera to-night?

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Nurse

Tristan.

Maurice

That's why I insisted on Stella's going. It was after Tristan that we got engaged. D'you remember, Mother?

Mrs. Tabret

Of course I do.

Maurice

We'd all been to hear it and then we went on to supper. I drove Stella round Regent's Park in a little two-seater I had then and I swore I'd go on driving round and round till she promised to marry me. Tristan had given her such an appetite that by the time we were halfway around the second time, she said, oh, hell, if I must either marry you or die of starvation I'd sooner marry you.

Harvester

Is there a word of truth in this story, Mrs. Tabret?

Mrs. Tabret

I don't know. They were both as mad as hatters in those days. All I know is that the rest of us had only just ordered our supper when they came in looking like a pair of cats who'd swallowed a canary and said they were engaged.

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(The door is opened and STELLA comes in followed by her brother-in-law COLIN TABRET. STELLA is twenty-eight and beautiful. She is wearing an evening dress and an opera cloak. COLIN, a tall, dark, handsome fellow in the early thirties, is in full evening dress, long coat and white tie.)

Maurice

Stella.

Stella

Darling. Have you missed me?

(She goes over to him and lightly kisses him on the forehead.)

Maurice

Why are you back already, you wretched girl? You promised me to go and have supper.

Stella

I was so thrilled and excited by the opera. I felt I simply couldn't eat a thing.

Maurice

Hang it all, you might have gone to Lucien's and had a dance or two and a bottle of bubbly! What's the good of my spending the eyes of my head on buying you a new dress when you won't let anyone see it. *(To LICONDA.)* She said it was too dressed up to go

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to the opera in, but I exercised my marital authority and made her.

Stella

Darling, I wanted to show it off in the intervals, but I hadn't the nerve and I kept my cloak on.

Maurice

Well, take it off now and show the gentlemen. The only way I managed to get them to stay was by promising to let them have a look at your new dress when you came home.

Stella

What nonsense. As if Major Liconda or Dr. Harvester knew one frock from another.

Maurice

Don't be so damned contemptuous of the male sex, Stella. Take off your cloak and let's have a good look at you.

Stella

You brute, Maurice, you've made me feel shy now. *(She is sitting on the end of his bed and slips off her cloak.)*

Maurice

Stand up.

(She hesitates a moment and then still holding the cloak about her hips stands up. She lets it fall to her feet.)

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Harvester

It's lovely.

(She staggers a little and smothers a cry.)

Maurice

Halloa, what's the matter?

(COLIN catches her and helps her to a chair.)

Stella

It's nothing. I feel so frightfully faint.

Mrs. Tabret

Oh, my dear.

Maurice

Stella.

(The NURSE and the DOCTOR go up to her.)

Harvester

It's all right, Maurice. Don't fuss. *(To STELLA.)* Put your head down between your legs.

(He puts his hand on her neck to force her head down. NURSE WAYLAND puts her hands to her side as though to support her. But STELLA pushes her away.)

Stella

No, don't. Don't come near me. I shall be all right again in a minute. It's silly of me.

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Maurice

I'm sorry, darling. It was my fault.

Stella

It's nothing. I feel better already.

Mrs. Tabret

My own belief is that she's just faint from lack of food. At what time did you dine?

Colin

We didn't dine. We just had some caviar and half a bottle of pop before the opera.

Mrs. Tabret

You are a ridiculous pair.

Stella

I enjoy Wagner so much more on an empty stomach. I'm really quite all right now.

Mrs. Tabret

Nurse, would you mind going to the kitchen and seeing if you can find anything for these silly young things to eat?

Nurse

Of course not. There ought to be some ham. I'll make them some sandwiches.

Mrs. Tabret

Colin can get a bottle of champagne out of the cellar.

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Colin

All right, Mother. Is there any ice in the house? I've got a thirst I wouldn't sell for twenty pounds.

(He opens the door for NURSE WAYLAND and they both go out.)

Liconda

Well, I'll say good-bye. *(To STELLA.)* I'm sorry you're feeling poorly.

Stella

I shall be all right when I've had something to eat. I think Mrs. Tabret is quite right. What I want is a large ham sandwich with a lot of mustard on it.

Maurice

You're looking better, you know. Just for a moment you were as white as a sheet.

Liconda

Good-bye.

Mrs. Tabret

Good-bye. It was so nice of you to look in.

(He goes out.)

Harvester

I'll just stay a moment or two longer, if you don't mind. I don't trust these young women who don't feed themselves properly.

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(MRS. TABRET gives MAURICE and STELLA a glance. She knows they want to have a moment to themselves.)

Mrs. Tabret

(To DR. HARVESTER.) Let's take a turn in the garden, shall we? It's so warm and lovely.

Harvester

Come on. And I hope Nurse Wayland has the sense to cut a sandwich for me, too.

(The DOCTOR and MRS. TABRET go out. As soon as they are alone STELLA goes over to her husband and gives him a long, loving kiss on the lips. He puts his arm round her neck.)

Maurice

Darling.

(She releases herself and sitting down on the bed holds one of his thin, sick hands.)

Stella

I'm sorry I made such a fool of myself.

Maurice

You scared the life out of me, you little beast. Why didn't you go on to some place and have a bite before you came home?

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Stella

I didn't want to. I wanted to get back.

Maurice

Will you give me your word of honour that you didn't go on to dance because you thought I should be waiting up for you?

Stella

Don't be an old silly. You know that I love to think you want me back so much. You don't imagine I care a hang about dancing.

Maurice

You little liar. How can anyone dance as well as you without being crazy about it? You're the best dancer I ever danced with.

Stella

Oh, but you know how one changes. All the dances are different now, and after all I'm not so young as I was either.

Maurice

You're twenty-eight. You're only a girl. You ought to be having the time of your life. Oh, my dear, it is rotten for you.

Stella

Oh, darling, don't. You mustn't think that. Don't imagine for a moment that I've given up a thing that meant anything to me.

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Maurice

You must allow me to have my own opinion. Anyhow it's been a snip having old Colin here. It's damned well forced you to go out.

Stella

Darling, you talk as though I was shut up like a nun. I'm always going out. I see all the plays.

Maurice

Yes, at matinées with my mother. She's a dear old thing, but she's not precisely exhilarating. After all, when one's young one wants to be with young people. One wants to say and do all sorts of things that seem merely silly to the elderly. They smile indulgently because they have the tolerance of wise old people. Damn it all, one doesn't want their indulgence. One wants to play the fool because one's young. And it's wise for the young to be rather foolish.

Stella

My dear, you mustn't be epigrammatic. They tell me it's so out of date.

Maurice

I was hoping you'd dance till your feet were dropping off and then go for a spin in the moonlight. Do you remember, we did that once one night and we had

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breakfast at a pub on the river in our evening things.
What a lark!

Stella

We were a pair of lunatics in those days. I was much too tired to do anything like that. I only wanted to get home.

Maurice

The honest fact is that you've lost the habit of going on a binge.

Stella

I don't want to go on a binge if you can't come with me.

Maurice

That is perfectly idiotic of you, my poor child. I wish that silly ass Colin weren't going away so soon.

Stella

He only came home for six months and he's stayed nearly a year.

Maurice

You promised you'd try to persuade him to stay on for a bit.

Stella

He must get back to his work.

Maurice

Why can't he sell his old plantation and settle down here?

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Stella

He'd be a fish out of water in England. When a man's got used to the sort of life he's lived out there it's frightfully difficult for him to settle down in an office or something like that.

Maurice

I suppose it is really. I should have hated it, too. I wasn't really thinking of myself, and Mother must be used to having a pair of useless sons by now. I was thinking of you.

Stella

I'm quite capable of thinking of myself, darling. I'm a very selfish woman.

Maurice

My poor child, you mustn't think because I've got a broken back I'm a drivelling imbecile.

Stella

How can I think anything else when I see you fussing like an old hen with an only chick because you imagine I may be having a rather thin time? I'm not having a thin time. You never try to prevent me from doing anything I want to. No one could be more considerate than you are. I'm busy all day long and the days just fly past. I don't know what it is to be bored. Why, I haven't time for half the things I want to do.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

Yes, you're wonderful. . . . You've always been wonderful. You've made the best of a bad job, all right. I've had to. But why should you? Resignation. I've had to set my teeth and learn it. But what has a girl like you to do with resignation?

Stella

Oh, darling, don't talk like that. You mustn't think such things. I married you because I loved you. What a foul brute I should be if I stopped loving you now that you want my love more than ever.

Maurice

Oh, my dear, we can't love because we ought to. Love comes and goes and we can none of us help ourselves.

Stella

(*With a sharp look at him.*) Maurice, what do you mean? (*She looks away.*) Has there been anything in my behaviour to lead you to think that I wasn't the same as I'd always been?

Maurice

(*With deep affection.*) No, darling. You've been angelic always, always. (*Taken aback.*) Why, what's the matter? You suddenly went quite white. You're not feeling faint again?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

No. I didn't know I went white.

Maurice

You know, if I've seemed often to take for granted all you've done for me you mustn't think I'm not conscious all the time how much I owe you.

Stella

That's very silly of you, my pet. I don't know that I've done anything for you at all except be moderately civil. You've never let me

Maurice

I've never let you nurse me. Not on your life. I couldn't have borne that you should have anything to do with the disgusting side of illness. (*With a grin.*) My precious, I don't want you to smell of antiseptics. I want you to smell of the dawn. I'm so grateful to you, Stella.

Stella

God knows, you've got a cause to be.

Maurice

(*Casually.*) You know that I'm never going to get well, Stella, don't you?

Stella

I don't, indeed. It's a long business, we know that, but I'm absolutely convinced you'll get at all events very much better.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

They tell me that one of these days they'll try operating again to see if they can't possibly put me right. But I know they're lying. They pretend they can do something in order to give me hope, and I pretend to believe them because it's the easiest thing to do. I know I'm here for life, Stella.

(There is a moment's pause. This is the first time that STELLA has realized that MAURICE knows his case is hopeless.)

Stella

(Very earnestly.) Then let's take what comfort we can in the great joy we've had in one another in the days when you were well and strong. I shall always be grateful for the happiness you gave me and for your love, your great love.

Maurice

Do you think that's changed? No. I love you as deeply, as devotedly as I ever did. I'm not often silly and sentimental, am I, Stella?

Stella

(With a little smile.) Is it so silly to be sentimental? No, you're not often.

Maurice

You're everything in the world to me, Stella. People have been most awfully kind to me, and it's not till

THE SACRED FLAME

you're crocked up as I am that you find out how kind people are. They've been simply topping. But there's not one of them that I wouldn't see in hell if it would save you from unhappiness or trouble.

Stella

(In a lighter tone, going back to her chaffing way with him.) Well, I wouldn't tell them if I were you. I don't believe they'd awfully like it.

Maurice

(With a smile.) I ought to be frightened because I'm so dependent on you, but I'm not because I know, not just with my mind or my heart, but with every nerve in me, with every little feeling and every pain, how good you are.

Stella

(Trying to take his speech lightly.) Now, darling, you really are exaggerating. If you go on like this I shall send you to bed.

Maurice

My precious. You can laugh at me, but I see the tears in your lovely eyes.

Stella

(With sudden emotion.) Maurice, I'm a very weak, a very imperfect, and a very sinful woman.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

(Suddenly changing, but still with the greatest affection.) Come down to earth, you silly little ass.

Stella

(Unable not to feel a trifle anxious.) Why are you saying all this to me just to-night?

Maurice

(Smiling.) One can't always jump through a hoop to make people laugh. It's hardly becoming in a gentleman approaching middle age who's chained to an invalid bed. You must forgive me if my flow of jokes sometimes runs dry.

Stella

You're sure you're not worrying about anything?

Maurice

You know, when you're shut up as I am you find out all sorts of interesting things. Being an invalid fortunately has its compensations. Of course, people are very sympathetic, but you mustn't abuse their sympathy. They ask you how you are, but they don't really care a damn. Why should they? Life is for the living and I'm dead.

Stella

(Strangely harassed.) Maurice, oh, my darling.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

You soon cotton on to it and you say you're as fit as a fiddle. You must take care not to bore the people who come to see you and you soon discover that it bores them if you talk about yourself. Let them talk about themselves. That always interests them and they say, what an intelligent fellow he is. Make jokes. Make all the jokes you can—good, bad, and indifferent; when you've made them laugh, they feel they needn't be sorry for you, and that's a relief to them. And when they go away they feel so kindly disposed towards you.

Stella

Oh, my precious, you break my heart. It's so cruel to think that you should have had to learn such bitter truths.

Maurice

My dear, they're not so bitter as all that. That's only human nature and I get a lot of fun out of observing it. I'm not so terribly to be pitied. I've learnt to take pleasure in all sorts of things, other people's affairs and books and so on, that I never cared a tinker's dam for before. I should never have mentioned it only I wanted to tell you that it's you who've given me the courage to carry on. I'm not unhappy. I don't know how many years I shall hang on, but if you'll help me, darling, I think I can make a pretty

THE SACRED FLAME

good job of it. I owe everything to you. Nothing matters to me very much when I know I shall see you tomorrow and the next day and the day after that and always. And when I've had a bit of pain I think to myself when you come in next you'll kiss me, and I feel the tenderness of your lips on my beating heart.

Stella

(*Shattered by emotion.*) Maurice, I'm unworthy of such love. I'm so ashamed. I'm so selfish. I'm so thoughtless.

Maurice

Never.

Stella

Why did you make me go out to-night? Did you think it was any pleasure to me?

Maurice

I didn't care. I was thinking of my pleasure. I wanted you to hear again the music we'd heard together that night we got engaged. I was crazy about you. Do you remember how you cried in the second act when Tristan and Isolde sing that duet of theirs and I held your hand in the dark? Why did you cry?

Stella

I cried because I loved you and I was happy.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

Did you cry to-night?

Stella

I don't know.

Maurice

You know that music is stunning, isn't it?

Stella

(*Smiling through her tears.*) People seem to think it's above the average.

Maurice

You seemed to carry it still in your eyes when you came in. They were bright and shining. They were like great deep pools of light. You've never looked so beautiful as you looked to-night. You made the Venus of Milo look like a lump of cheese.

Stella

(*Recovered now and chaffing him again.*) Go on, darling, I can bear much more in the same strain.

Maurice

I could go on for weeks.

Stella

No, then I'd be afraid you were prejudiced. Go on till the sandwiches come in.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

Give me your hands.

Stella

No, I won't. Let's be sensible and talk about what's going to win the Grand National.

Maurice

Of course the honest-to-God truth is that you're ever so much lovelier than when I married you. What is there that gives you this sudden new radiance? You look like a goddess who's just created a world and is about to step upon it for the first time.

Stella

I don't know why I should look any different from usual.

Maurice

I watch your face. I know every change in it from day to day. A year ago you had a strained, almost a hunted, look, but now lately you've had an air that is strangely peaceful. You've gained a sort of beautiful serenity.

Stella

My poor lamb. I'm afraid that can only be due to advancing years. Soon you'll discover the first wrinkle on my forehead and then the first white hair.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

No, no. You must never grow old. I couldn't bear it. Oh, how cruel that all that beauty, all that superb and shining youth of yours . . .

Stella

(*Interrupting him quickly.*) No, don't, Maurice, I beseech you.

Maurice

It would have been better for both of us if I'd been killed when I crashed. I'm no use to you, I'm no use to anybody.

Stella

Oh, Maurice, how *can* you say that? Don't you know how desperately afraid I was when they told me you were hurt and how relieved, how infinitely thankful, when they told me at last, after days and days of anguish, that you would live?

Maurice

They should never have let me. Why didn't they put me out of my misery when I was all smashed up? It only wanted an injection a little stronger than usual. That was the cruelty—to bring me back to life. Cruel to me and ten times more cruel to you.

Stella

I won't let you say it. It's not true. It's not true.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

I think I could have borne it if we'd had a child. Oh, Stella, if we'd only had a little kid and I could think to myself that it was you and me. And you would have something to console you. After all, it's a woman's destiny to have children. You wouldn't have felt that you had entirely wasted your life.

Stella

But, Maurice, my dear, I *don't* feel I've wasted my life. You're not yourself to-night. You're ill and tired. Oh, what has come over you?

Maurice

I love you, Stella. I want to take you in my arms as I used to. I want to press my lips to yours and see your eyes close and your head fall back and feel your dear soft body grow tense with desire. Stella, Stella. I can't bear it. (*He bursts into tears, clinging to her.*)

Stella

Maurice, darling. Don't. Don't cry.

(*He sobs hysterically while she rocks him to and fro like a mother her child. Then he gets hold of himself.*)

Maurice

(*With a complete change of tone, in a matter-of-fact voice.*) Oh, my God, what a damned fool I am. Give me a handkerchief.

THE SACRED FLAME

(She gives him one from under the pillow and he blows his nose.)

Stella

My dear, you did frighten me.

Maurice

It's what they call a nerve storm. It's lucky it was only you there. It would have been a pretty kettle of fish if Nurse Wayland had seen me like that.

Stella

(Trying to laugh with him.) It would have been a much prettier kettle of fish if I'd seen you clinging to her capacious bosom.

Maurice

Now you mention it I must admit it is rather capacious.

Stella

They're not worn now.

Maurice

I say, you haven't got a glass, have you?

Stella

My angel, how do you imagine I apply lipstick to my ruby lips? *(She takes a little glass out of her bag and hands it to him.)*

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

(*Laughing at himself.*) For an intrepid aviator I look rather tear-stained, if I may say so. (*He wipes his eyes with the handkerchief.*)

Stella

Let me powder your nose. You can't think what a comfort it is after you've been upset.

Maurice

Go on with you. You can give me a whisky and soda if you like.

Stella

All right. But I'll powder mine.

Maurice

I feel like a house on fire now.

Stella

I wish someone would explain how it is that a dab of powder can in the twinkling of an eye reduce a woman's nose from an unwieldy lump to a dear little thing that no one can deny is her best feature.

Maurice

These are the miracles of science that we read about.

Stella

Now I'll get you your whisky and soda.

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

Here's Colin. I'll have a glass of bubbly instead.

(COLIN *comes in with a tray on which are glasses, ice, and a bottle of champagne.*)

Colin

I'm afraid I've been a devil of a time.

Maurice

I knew you couldn't be trusted in the cellar by yourself. We were just going to send a search party after you.

Colin

Well, first I couldn't find anything to break the ice with and then I couldn't find the nippers to cut the wire. And then I thought I might as well put the car away. I didn't want to leave it outside all night.

Maurice

Meanwhile Stella is famishing.

Colin

Nurse Wayland is just coming. She's making some sandwiches with bacon and they smell a fair treat.

(*The NURSE comes in with a covered entrée dish.*)

Stella

Here she is. That is kind of you, Nurse. If there's anything I adore it's bacon sandwiches.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

I haven't brought any knives and forks. I thought you could eat with your fingers.

Stella

Heavenly.

Colin

I'll just bolt up and change my coat. I might just as well be comfortable and I shan't be a minute.

Stella

Well, I'm not going to wait for you.

Colin

All right. Go right ahead. But leave me my fair share or else all is over between us.

(He goes out. STELLA goes to the window.)

Stella

Dr. Harvester, come and eat a sandwich before it gets cold.

Maurice

I don't think I'll wait to see you people make pigs of yourselves. I think I'll turn in.

Stella

Aren't you going to have a drink with us?

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

I don't think I will if you don't mind. I'm rather tired.

Stella

Oh, I am sorry, Maurice. But there's nothing to stay up for if you're tired.

Maurice

You might look in on your way up to bed, Stella.

Stella

Yes, rather. But I shan't disturb you if you're asleep.

Maurice

I shan't be asleep. I've got a bit of a head. I'll just lie still in the dark and it'll go away.

(*As NURSE WAYLAND starts to wheel him out,*
MRS. TABRET and DR. HARVESTER come in.)

Harvester

Did I hear you calling me?

Stella

You did. Maurice is going to bed.

Mrs. Tabret

Oh, I'm glad. It's fearfully late. Good-night, old boy. Sleep well. (*She leans over and kisses him on the forehead.*)

THE SACRED FLAME

Maurice

Good-night, Mother. Bless you.

Harvester

Let me give you a hand, Nurse.

Nurse

I can manage perfectly. I'm so used to wheeling the invalid bed and he weighs nothing.

Maurice

I never weighed more than ten stone eight when I was well.

Harvester

Never mind. Let me push him in. I'd like to.

Maurice

Let the man do something for his money, Nurse.
(*Putting on a cockney accent.*) You bring me drops and me powder puff, dearie.

(*The NURSE opens the door and DR. HARVESTER pushes the bed out.*)

Stella

Don't be long, Doctor, or the sandwiches will be stone cold.

(*The door is closed. STELLA and MRS. TABRET are left alone.*)

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Maurice is rather nervous to-night.

Mrs. Tabret

Yes, I noticed it.

Stella

I'm sorry I went to the opera.

Mrs. Tabret

My dear, you go out so little.

Stella

I haven't the inclination, really.

Mrs. Tabret

I'm afraid you're awfully tired.

Stella

(*With a smile.*) Dead.

Mrs. Tabret

Why don't you eat something?

Stella

No, I'll wait till the others come.

Mrs. Tabret

Whatever happens, darling, I want you to know that I'm deeply grateful for all you've done for Maurice.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

(*Startled.*) Why do you say that? You don't think he's any worse?

Mrs. Tabret

No, I think he's just about the same as usual.

Stella

He does get a little nervous and high-strung sometimes.

Mrs. Tabret

Yes, I know.

Stella

You startled me. I don't know why you should suddenly say a thing like that.

Mrs. Tabret

(*Smiling.*) Is there any reason I shouldn't?

Stella

It sounded strangely ominous.

Mrs. Tabret

I feel I'd like you to know that I realize what a great sacrifice you've made for him for so many years. You mustn't think that I've taken it as a matter of course.

Stella

Oh, my dear, don't. It would be inhuman if I didn't feel unspeakably sorry for Maurice. It's awful for

THE SACRED FLAME

him, poor darling. Naturally if there was anything I could do to make things a little easier for him I was anxious to do it.

Mrs. Tabret

After all, you didn't marry him to be the helpmate of a hopeless cripple.

Stella

One takes the rough with the smooth.

Mrs. Tabret

I know it's very irksome to have an old woman like me always living with you. It's difficult to be a mother-in-law and welcome.

Stella

(*Charmingly.*) My dear, you've been kindness itself to me. What should I have done without you?

Mrs. Tabret

I will admit that I've tried not to be a pest. You'd have been within your rights if you'd refused to have me to live here. I must thank you for all you've done for me, too.

Stella

Oh, my dear, you make me feel quite shy.

Mrs. Tabret

You're a very young and a very beautiful woman. You have the right to live your life just as every-

THE SACRED FLAME

one else has. For six years now you've given up everything to be the sole comfort of a man who was your husband only because a legal ceremony had joined you together.

Stella

No, no. Because love had joined us together.

Mrs. Tabret

My poor child, I'm so desperately sorry for you. Whatever the future may have in store I shall never forget your courage, your self-sacrifice, and your patience.

Stella.

(*Puzzled and a little frightened.*) I don't understand what you mean.

Mrs. Tabret

(*With a tolerant and ironic smile.*) Don't you? Well, let us suppose that this is the anniversary of my wedding day and my thoughts have been much occupied with the ups and downs, the fortunes and misfortunes of married life.

(*COLIN comes in. He has taken off his long evening coat and wears a very shabby old golf coat.*)

Colin

Hulloa, where are the others?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Maurice has gone to bed. Dr. Harvester is just coming.

Mrs. Tabret

Now, come on, children. Sit down and have something to eat.

Colin

I'll pour out some wine, shall I?

(He pours out three glasses of champagne while STELLA helps herself to a sandwich.)

Stella

Hm. Scrumptious.

Mrs. Tabret

Nurse Wayland makes them well, doesn't she?

Stella

Marvellously.

(DR. HARVESTER comes in.)

Stella

If you don't hurry up you'll be too late. They're simply divine.

Harvester

I'll just have one and swallow a glass of bubbly and bolt. It's any old time and I've got to be up bright and early in the morning.

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

Is Maurice all right?

Harvester

Oh, fairly. He's a bit down to-night for some reason. I don't know why. He was in great spirits earlier in the evening.

Mrs. Tabret

I expect he's just tired. He *wou d* sit up.

Harvester

Nurse Wayland says that something has happened to upset him. Is that true?

Mrs. Tabret

Not that I know of.

Harvester

He says he's got a headache. I've left him a sleeping draught that he can take if he can't get off or wakes in the night and feels restless.

Stella

I'll go in and see him before I go to bed. If he can only get a good rest I'm sure he'll be his usual self to-morrow.

Mrs. Tabret

Sit with him a little, Stella.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Of course I will.

Harvester

Well, I must be off. Good-night, Mrs. Tabret. I've had a jolly evening.

Mrs. Tabret

I'll come and see you to the door and then I shall go up to bed. Good-night, children.

Stella

Good-night.

(They kiss one another and then MRS. TABRET kisses COLIN.)

Mrs. Tabret

Good-night, Colin dear. Don't stay up too late, either of you.

Colin

And put out the lights and see that the windows are properly closed and the safety catches in place. I will, Mother.

Mrs. Tabret

(Pleased with his chaff, to DR. HARVESTER.) You see how these boys treat me. They have no respect for their aged mother.

Colin

A certain amount of restrained affection, however.

THE SACRED FLAME

Mrs. Tabret

Bless you, my dear, now and always.

Harvester

Good-night.

Stella

Good-night. We shall see you in a day or two, I suppose.

Harvester

I expect so.

Colin

Good-night, old boy.

(DR. HARVESTER and MRS. TABRET go out.

COLIN goes over to the windows and shuts them and draws the curtains. The moment the door closes on MRS. TABRET, STELLA puts down the sandwich she has been making a pretence of eating. She stands looking out into space. When COLIN has finished shutting up, he turns off most of the lights so that the room is shrouded in darkness and there is only light on STELLA. He turns to her.)

Colin

Stella . . . Stella.

(She gives a stifled sob and looks at him, misery in her eyes.)

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Oh, Colin. The anguish.

Colin

(*Going towards her*). My poor child.

Stella

Don't touch me. Oh, what shall I do? Colin, what have we done?

Colin

Darling.

Stella

Maurice was so strange to-night. I couldn't make him out. I was almost afraid he suspected.

Colin

Impossible.

Stella

He must never know. Never! I'd do anything in the world to prevent it.

Colin

I'm so terribly sorry.

Stella

We're in a hopeless pass. Hopeless. Why did you ever love me? Why did I ever love you?

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

Stella.

(He stretches out his arms, but she turns away.)

Stella

Oh, I'm so ashamed. *(She hides her face with her hands.)*

THE END OF ACT ONE

The Sacred Flame: Act Two

ACT TWO

THE SCENE *is the same as in the preceding act.*

Next morning, and about midday.

COLIN *is seated at a writing-table writing letters.*

MAJOR LICONDA *is shown in by the MAID. He is in golfing things.*

Alice

Major Liconda.

Colin

(Getting up.) Oh, how do you do?

(The MAID goes out.)

Liconda

My dear boy, what an awful thing. I'm absolutely horrified. I've only just this minute heard.

Colin

It's nice of you to have come. As you can imagine we're all very much upset.

Liconda

I've been playing golf. I went out early. I had a match at nine. Someone told me at the clubhouse when I got in. I could hardly believe it.

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

I'm afraid it's true all the same.

Liconda

But Maurice seemed comparatively well last night.

Colin

Anyhow no worse than usual.

Liconda

I thought him in such good spirits. He was full of fun. He was cracking jokes.

Colin

Yes, I know.

Liconda

Of course, I know nothing. You know Blake at the club? I don't know if you've ever played with him.

Colin

No. But I've met him.

Liconda

Well, he came up when I was standing at the bar having a drink and said to me: I say, have you heard that poor Maurice Tabret died last night? By George, it gave me a shock. You know, when one isn't as young as one was, it always gives one a turn to hear of the death of someone you knew.

Colin

I suppose it does.

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Liconda

Blake hadn't heard any of the details. Was he taken suddenly worse in the night?

Colin

No, he said he was rather tired. Stella and I were going to have a snack before going to bed. He said he wouldn't wait. It was very natural; it was getting a bit late, you know. Harvester was here and he went along with him and Nurse Wayland and helped to put him to bed. He seemed all right then.

Liconda

Did he just die in his sleep?

Colin

I suppose so.

Liconda

What a mercy. That's the best way, isn't it? We'd all give something to know for certain that when our time came we'd pass out like that.

Colin

He can't have felt ill, or he'd have rung. He had a bell-push under his pillow and it rings in Nurse Wayland's room. She'd have been down like a flash if there'd been a sound.

Liconda

She heard nothing?

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

Nothing.

Liconda

When did you find out then?

Colin

Well, you see, sometimes, if he'd had a poorish night, you know, he slept rather late in the morning. And he was always allowed to sleep on. You know what nurses are. However rotten a night you've had they come bustling in at the crack of dawn and they don't care a damn if you're sleeping or not. You must be washed and have your hair brushed and your pillows shaken.

Liconda

Don't I know it? I never know which I dread most, an attack of malaria or a really efficient nurse.

Colin

Well, Stella stopped all that. She insisted that no one should go in to Maurice till he rang.

Liconda

Poor devil, at all events when he was asleep he was happy.

Colin

I believe it was the only matter on which there'd been any friction between Stella and Nurse Wayland. You know, Nurse Wayland is really a very good sort.

THE SACRED FLAME

She was never any trouble in the house and she was always good-tempered and that sort of thing.

Liconda

Oh, I know. It struck me that she was a thoroughly nice girl.

Colin

When she first came she wanted to get Maurice ready for the day as she called it, at eight o'clock every morning. Routine, you know. And she said if he was tired he could go to sleep again afterwards. But Stella put her foot down. She said she didn't want to interfere with anything else, but on that point she insisted. And Nurse Wayland could either knuckle under or go.

Liconda

Quite right.

Colin

We were just finishing breakfast, about half-past nine, I think, Stella and I and Mother, when Nurse Wayland came in. She never has breakfast. She just makes herself a cup of cocoa when she gets up at seven.

Liconda

My God, these women, what a genius they have for doing the uncomfortable thing.

Colin

I noticed she was very white. She said she'd just been in to Maurice. I never heard him ring, said

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella. You know what these jerry-built houses are. You hear every bell in the house.

Liconda

Yes, mine's like that.

Colin

He didn't ring, said Nurse Wayland. It was so late I thought I'd just peep in and see if he was all right. Then Stella got right up on her hind legs. I won't have it, she said. I've forbidden you to go in till he rings. How dare you disobey me. I've never seen Stella in such a passion. I saw that Nurse Wayland was trembling. She looked all funny. Scared, you know. But not of Stella. I had a sort of suspicion something was wrong. Hold hard, Stella, I said. I got up. Is anything the matter, Nurse? I asked. She gave a sort of cry and clenched her hands. I'm afraid he's dead, she said.

Liconda

Good God! How awful.

Colin

Stella gave a sort of gasp and then she went into a dead faint.

Liconda

Your poor mother.

Colin

Mother was wonderful. You know when half a dozen things happen at a time, you seem to see them all sep-

THE SACRED FLAME

arately and yet together. I sprang forward to help Stella. She'd fallen on the floor with a thump. I don't know, for a moment I was afraid the shock had killed her. And I saw Mother sitting at the table with a piece of toast in her hand. And she just looked at Nurse Wayland, I don't know, as though she couldn't understand. She was awfully white and then she began to tremble. She never made a sound. She shrank back into her chair and seemed all of a sudden to become an old, old woman.

Liconda

Why didn't the fool break it to you more gently?

Colin

Then Mother stood up. She got hold of herself quicker than any of us. I never knew she had such nerve.

Liconda

She's a woman in a thousand. I knew that.

Colin

You'd better go for Dr. Harvester, she said to me. (*With a sudden falter.*) By God, I shall never get the sound of her voice out of my ears.

Liconda

Hold on, old man. It's no good you going to pieces. Don't tell me any more if it upsets you.

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

(*Pulling himself together.*) No, I'm all right. There's nothing more to tell. Mother said, Nurse and I'll see to Stella. Don't you bother. That seemed to pull Nurse Wayland up. She came forward and she and Mother began to try to get Stella round. I went into Maurice's room. I felt his pulse and I put my hand on his heart. He looked as if he was asleep. I knew he was dead. I got the car and went to Dr. Harvester's. He'd started on his rounds, but they knew where he'd gone more or less and I bolted after him. Luckily I caught him and I brought him back with me. He said he thought poor Maurice had been dead for a good two hours.

Liconda

Did he say what had happened?

Colin

He thinks it may have been an embolism. Or perhaps heart failure, you know.

Liconda

How about Stella?

Colin

She's all right, thank God. She came to after a bit. My God, she did give me a fright.

Liconda

I don't wonder.

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

Harvester wanted her to go to bed, but she wouldn't. She's in Maurice's room now.

Liconda

What about your mother?

Colin

Harvester's with her. He had to go and see some patients, but he said he'd come back, and he turned up just before you did. Here he is.

(As he says these words, DR. HARVESTER comes in.)

He and MAJOR LICONDA shake hands.)

Harvester

Hulloa, Major.

Liconda

This is a very sad errand that has brought you here, Doctor.

Harvester

It's naturally been a dreadful shock to Mrs. Tabret and Stella.

Liconda

How is Mrs. Tabret?

Harvester

She's bearing up wonderfully. She's very much upset, but she's trying not to show it. She has a great deal of self-control.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

I wonder if she'd like to see me.

Harvester

I'm sure she would.

Colin

Shall I run up and see?

Liconda

It would be very kind of you, Colin. Say that if she doesn't want to be bothered with me she has only to say so. I shall quite understand. I don't want to be a nuisance, but if it'll be any comfort to her to see me I shall be only too glad.

Colin

All right.

(He goes out.)

Liconda

You know, I've known Mrs. Tabret for over thirty years. Her husband was in the Indian Civil.

Harvester

Yes, she told me.

Liconda

They were almost the first people I got to know at all well when I went out to India. She's one of the best, you know. She always was. Everybody liked her.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

Of course, I've seen a good deal of her during the last five years. She's really been wonderful. So has Stella for the matter of that.

Liconda

One can't help being rather thankful it's all over.

Harvester

He never had a chance of getting better, poor devil.

Liconda

Yes, you said that last night.

Harvester

Of course, he might have gone on for years like that. But what was the good? It was rotten for him and rotten for everyone connected with him.

Liconda

You can't say that any of them grudged the sacrifices they had to make for his sake.

Harvester

No. Rather not. They were awfully good to him.

Liconda

I could wish the end hadn't come quite so suddenly.

Harvester

Oh, why? It's much better that he should have passed out like that rather than get inflammation of

THE SACRED FLAME

the lungs or something of that sort that he just hadn't the strength to fight against.

Liconda

So far as he was concerned, yes. I was thinking of his mother and Stella.

(NURSE WAYLAND *comes in. She wears her nurse's uniform.*)

Harvester

Hulloa, Nurse. I thought you were having a rest.

Liconda

Good-morning.

Nurse

Good-morning, Major. I'm glad you came round. Mrs. Tabret will be glad to see you.

Harvester

I told you to go and lie down, Nurse.

Nurse

I couldn't. I was too restless.

Harvester

Then why don't you go for a walk? You can do no good by sitting about and moping.

Liconda

I'm afraid it's been as great a shock to Nurse Wayland as to the rest of us. After all, she'd been looking after Maurice for a long time.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

Yes, it's been a great shock to me. He was a dear. One couldn't help admiring him. He bore his terrible misfortune with so much courage.

Harvester

He was topping. There's no doubt about that.

Nurse

I naturally grew attached to him. He was always so gay and so grateful for what one did for him.

Liconda

I suppose you'll try to get a good long holiday before you take another job.

Nurse

I haven't made any plans yet.

Harvester

What about those friends of yours who live on the South Coast? Why don't you spend a few weeks with them? To tell you the truth, you're looking all in.

Nurse

(*Listlessly.*) Am I?

Harvester

You must try not to take it too hard.

Nurse

A nurse naturally doesn't like to lose a patient. Especially so unexpectedly.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

It was always on the cards that he'd go out suddenly.

Nurse

Like a candle that you blow out when you don't want it any more. Where does the flame go then?

(DR. HARVESTER *looks at her for a moment reflectively.*)

Harvester

(*Kindly.*) My dear, I'm afraid you're taking poor Maurice's death a good deal more to heart than is quite wise.

Nurse

(*With bitterness.*) Did you think he was only a case to me? Even a nurse is human. Strange as it may seem, she has a heart like other people.

Harvester

Of course she has a heart. But it doesn't do her or her patients any good if she allows her emotions to get the better of her common sense.

Nurse

Does that mean you think I've been inefficient?

Harvester

No, of course not. Heaven knows, you never spared yourself. Perhaps you've been trying to do a little too

THE SACRED FLAME

much for your strength. You take my advice, my dear, and go for a holiday. What you want is a real rest.

Nurse

What is it in your opinion that Maurice Tabret actually died of?

Harvester

Heart failure.

Nurse

Everybody dies of heart failure.

Harvester

Of course. But that's as good a thing as any to put on the death certificate.

Nurse

Are you going to have a post-mortem?

Harvester

No, why should I? It's quite unnecessary.

Nurse

(*Looking him full in the face.*) I don't agree with you.

Harvester

(*Without a trace of asperity.*) I'm sorry. But it's my affair. If I'm prepared to sign the death certificate I don't know that anyone else has any right to say anything about it.

Nurse

You've told me half a dozen times that Maurice Tabret might have lived for years.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

So he might. I can tell you now that it's a blessing for everybody concerned with him that he didn't.

Nurse

(*Very deliberately.*) Dr. Harvester, Maurice Tabret was murdered.

Harvester

What *are* you talking about?

Nurse

Do you want me to repeat it? Maurice Tabret was murdered.

Harvester

Rubbish.

Liconda

I daresay you're not quite yourself this morning, Nurse. It's very natural. But you must try to be reasonable. You oughtn't to say things that you can't possibly mean.

Nurse

I'm in complete possession of my senses, Major Liconda, and I know perfectly well what I'm saying.

Liconda

Do you mean to say that you intended that statement to be taken literally?

Nurse

Quite.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

(*Gravely.*) It's a very serious one, you know.

Nurse

I'm aware of that.

Harvester

It's grotesque.

Nurse

You've known me for five years, Dr. Harvester. Have I ever given you to imagine that I'm a neurotic or hysterical woman, given to talking in a wild and exaggerated way?

Liconda

Let us listen to what Nurse Wayland has to say. Do you mean by any chance that you are dissatisfied with the way your patient was treated by Doctor Harvester?

Harvester

By George, that never occurred to me. Is that it, Nurse? Don't hesitate to say anything you want to. I shan't be in the least offended. I don't want to put on any frills, and if there's anything that's making you miserable it's much better that you should say it. I'll try to explain.

Nurse

So far as I could judge you did everything for Maurice Tabret that medical skill could do.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

Besides, he was surely seen by several specialists.

Harvester

Half a dozen at the least.

Liconda

Well, Nurse Wayland?

Nurse

I am a trained nurse, Major Liconda; you can't imagine that if Maurice Tabret had died as the result of an error in treatment on Dr. Harvester's part I should be so heartless as to distress the relatives by mentioning it.

Harvester

I don't want to seem flippant on such an occasion, but I am forced to say that your magnanimity overwhelms me, Nurse Wayland.

Nurse

You can be flippant or condescending or sarcastic, Dr. Harvester. It means nothing to me.

Liconda

(*With a thin smile.*) I'm sure it will do no harm if we're all civil to one another, at least for a little while longer.

Nurse

I've made a definite charge and I stick to it.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

The charge being that some person or persons unknown murdered Maurice Tabret?

Nurse

Yes.

Harvester

But, my dear, why *should* anyone want to murder poor Maurice?

Nurse

That at present is no business of mine.

Harvester

Now, look here, Nurse, you know just as well as I do that everyone connected with him was devoted to Maurice. No one was ever more surrounded with love and affection than he was. It's incredible that anyone should even have *wished* him harm.

Nurse

Whatever I may think or may not think I am at liberty to keep to myself. I am not in the witness box.

Harvester

The witness box? (*Mockingly.*) Do you already see yourself giving sensational evidence at the Old Bailey?

Nurse

I can honestly say that I can imagine nothing more hateful than the notoriety that would be forced upon me if I were obliged to appear in court.

THE SACRED FLAME,

Harvester

There'd be notoriety all right. This is the sort of thing that would be jam for the papers. Come, now, be a sport, Nurse Wayland; you know just as well as I do that Maurice died of natural causes. What on earth is the use of making a fuss and getting everyone upset?

Nurse

If he died of natural causes a post-mortem will prove it and then I shall have nothing more to say.

Harvester

(*Irritably.*) I'm not going to have a post-mortem. You know how the relatives hate it.

Nurse

Are you afraid of what it will show?

Harvester

(*With decision.*) Not on your life.

Nurse

(*Defiantly.*) I warn you that if you sign the death certificate I shall go straight to the coroner and make a protest.

Harvester

I should have thought the Tabrets had had enough to put up with, without being obliged to go through the ordeal you want to force upon them.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

Major Liconda, you were in the Indian Police, weren't you? You ought to know about such things. Will you tell me what is the duty of a nurse who has reason to believe that her patient has come to his death by foul play?

Liconda

That is a question I'd sooner you hadn't asked me. I suppose her duty is quite clear. But I think she should be very sure that her reasons are valid before she exposes to distress and publicity a family that has treated her with unvarying kindness.

Harvester

What are your reasons anyway? You've made a charge, but to the best of my recollection you haven't given us an inkling of what it's based on.

Nurse

If you'd been willing to have a post-mortem nothing need have been said till we knew the results of it. But you've put me with my back to the wall. Major Liconda is right. Everyone in this house has treated me with the greatest consideration. I do at least owe it to them to make no charges that may directly or indirectly concern them behind their backs.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

Does that mean you want them sent for?

Nurse

Please.

Liconda

I think it's best. You've been so definite, Nurse Wayland, that neither Dr. Harvester nor I can keep the matter to ourselves. However distressing it may be I think Maurice's family should know what you have to say.

Nurse

I'm quite prepared to tell them. In point of fact, I think Mrs. Tabret is just coming.

Liconda

Where is Stella?

Harvester

Do you want her, too?

Liconda

I think it's better.

Harvester

I'll see if I can find her.

Liconda

I believe she's in Maurice's room.

(HARVESTER goes out.)

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

Don't judge me till you've heard all I have to say,
Major Liconda.

Liconda

(*With a certain severity.*) Miss Wayland, I happen to be a very old friend of the Tabrets and deeply attached to Mrs. Tabret. I regret that you should think it your duty at this moment of all others to add to their great sorrow. I can only hope that you will be shown *not* to have been justified.

Nurse

In that case you will have good reason to throw me out of the house, bag and baggage.

Liconda

It is not my house, Miss Wayland, and I doubt whether Colin Tabret would be willing to depute to me that pleasant task.

Nurse

I'm just as glad to know who are my friends and who are my enemies.

(*MRS. TABRET comes in with COLIN. She goes up to MAJOR LICONDA with a little smile. She is calm and composed.*)

Mrs. Tabret

My dear old friend.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

I felt that I must come and see you for a moment, my dear. I'm sure you know how deeply I sympathize with you, but I wanted to tell you that if in any way I can be of service to you . . .

Mrs. Tabret

(*Interrupting him with a little smile*). It was very kind of you to come and just like you.

Liconda

I'm relieved to see that you're bearing so bravely what must have been a bitter blow.

Mrs. Tabret

I am trying to put my own feelings away out of sight and mind. I want only to think that my son has ended his long martyrdom. He had a brave, a care-free, and a happy nature. He was not meant to live on a bed of sickness.

Liconda

I remember when he was a boy how amazing his vitality was.

Mrs. Tabret

I will not weep because he is dead. I will rejoice because he is free.

(*STELLA comes in from the garden, followed by
DR. HARVESTER. She is all in white.*)

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Dr. Harvester told me you were here and wanted to see me.

Liconda

I wanted first of all to tell you how much I feel for you in your sad loss.

Stella

You know, Maurice and I often talked of death. He was never afraid of it. He'd faced it often enough during the war. He didn't attach very much importance to it. He couldn't bear any of the trappings of woe. He told me that he didn't wish me to wear mourning for him. He said that if he died I was to carry on as usual. He wanted me to go about and do things exactly as if he were alive.

Mrs. Tabret

He loved you so much, Stella. He put your happiness above everything.

Stella

I know.

Colin

Those lines of Stevenson's keep ringing in my ears: "Home is the sailor, home from the sea."

Liconda

"And the hunter home from the hill." They're very moving to us who've spent our lives in distant places.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

You know, Maurice never quite believed that with this life everything ended for him. He didn't believe in a great many things that many people still more or less believe in . . .

Mrs. Tabret

(Interrupting.) I could never bring myself to teach my children what I couldn't myself believe. When they were little and I used to sit in the evenings in our house and look at the multitudinous stars sweeping across the blue sky of India and thought of what we are, so transitory and so insignificant, and yet with such a capacity for suffering, such a passion for beauty, I was overwhelmed by the mystery and the immensity of the universe. I could not conceive what was the cause of all those worlds I saw above me, nor what was the power that guided them, but my heart was filled with amazement and awe. What I vaguely divined was too stupendous to fit into the limits of any creed of men.

Stella

You know how Maurice was always laughing and joking. Even when he was speaking seriously he kept a little twinkle in his eye, so that you weren't quite sure he wasn't making fun of himself. I think he'd never quite grown out of some of those beliefs that I

THE SACRED FLAME

suppose he'd acquired unconsciously in his childhood from nurses and servants.

Mrs. Tabret

We always had native ayahs. Heaven knows what they taught the children.

Stella

He didn't believe with his reason, but in some strange way with his nerves or his heart, that perhaps there was something in the Eastern notion of the transmigration of souls.

Liconda

I wonder if one ever entirely ceases to believe in what one has been taught as a child.

Stella

I think deep down in him was the faith that when his soul left his poor wounded body it would find another tenement. I think he had so much vitality that he felt it impossible that he should not live again on this earth.

Mrs. Tabret

Ah, I've so often wished I had that comforting faith. Oh, to have a second chance and a third, to pass from life to life, purging yourself of imperfection and atoning for your sins, till at last you lose yourself in the infinite peace of the infinite soul of God.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

(*Turning to* NURSE WAYLAND.) I had something to say to you, Nurse. You'll be leaving us very soon now, I suppose.

Nurse

I suppose so.

Stella

I want to thank you for everything you did for Maurice, and I want you to know how deeply grateful I am to you.

Nurse

I did no more than my duty.

Stella

(*With a charming smile.*) Oh, no, you did much more than that. If it had been only your duty you could never have been so immensely thoughtful. You could never have anticipated Maurice's wants. You've been so awfully kind.

Nurse

(*A trifle sullenly.*) Your husband was a very easy patient. He was always anxious not to give trouble.

Stella

I've got a little plan that I want to tell you about. I've talked it over with Mrs. Tabret and she very much approves of it. You've had a long and hard time here.

THE SACRED FLAME

And your month's holiday a year has been very little rest. You've often talked to me about your sister in Japan and I know how much you've wanted to travel. If you'll allow me I should like to make it possible for you to go out to the East and have a good time.

Nurse

(Stonily on the defensive.) I don't think I understand what you mean.

Stella

(A little shyly, but in a manner that is disarming.) Well, my dear, a nurse's salary is never very large. I know that Maurice has left me everything he had and we've been living so economically, I shall be quite well off in a modest way. It would be dear of you if you'd let me make you a present of a few hundred pounds, a thousand, say, to make it a round sum, so that you could go for a nice long journey and need not think of earning your living for a while.

Nurse

(Hoarsely, trembling in her effort to control herself.) Do you think I would take money from you? Is that what you take me for?

Stella

(Surprised, but not taking her very seriously.) But what on earth is the harm of it? Come, Nurse, don't

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be unreasonable. You know I don't want to offend you.

Nurse

What I've done I've been paid for. If I wasn't satisfied with the payment I received I only had to go.

Stella

(*Taken aback, as though she had been suddenly, slapped in the face.*) Nurse, what is the matter? What have I said? Why do you speak to me like that?

Harvester

You mustn't take what Nurse Wayland says too literally. She really isn't herself to-day.

Liconda

No, Harvester, it's no good taking up that attitude. The position is much too serious. Stella, I've got something very unpleasant to tell you. I would sooner not have added to your present trouble, but I'm afraid it can't be avoided.

Stella

What is it?

Liconda

Nurse Wayland is not satisfied that Maurice died from heart failure.

Stella

But if Dr. Harvester says so? Surely he knows best.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

I am prepared to sign the death certificate. I have no doubt in my mind of the cause of death.

Liconda

Nurse Wayland thinks there ought to be a post-mortem.

Stella

(*With the utmost determination.*) Never. Never. Poor Maurice's body has suffered enough. I won't have him cut about to satisfy an idle curiosity. I absolutely refuse.

Liconda

I understand that an autopsy cannot be held except with the consent of the next of kin.

Nurse

Or on the order of the coroner.

Stella

What does she mean by that?

Liconda

I'm afraid she means that if you persist in your refusal she will go to the proper authority and make the statement she has already made to Dr. Harvester and me.

Stella

What is the statement?

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

Do you wish to repeat it, Nurse Wayland?

Nurse

(*Very coolly, almost with insolence.*) Not particularly. I have no objection to your doing so.

Harvester

Do you really insist on going through with this, Nurse? What you said to the Major and me was more or less confidential, wasn't it? Don't you think you'd better reflect a little more? If anything further is said the matter must necessarily go out of our control. I think you should consider the consequences of your attitude and the harm that may arise.

Nurse

I can't keep silent. I should never forgive myself.

Liconda

Nurse Wayland states that Maurice's death was not due to his illness, but to some other cause.

Stella

I'm dreadfully sorry, but I don't understand. What other cause could have brought about his death?

Liconda

She says he was murdered.

(COLIN and STELLA start. MRS. TABRET smothers a cry.)

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Murdered? You must be mad, Nurse.

Liconda

Harvester and I have pointed out to her that he was regarded by everyone connected with him with the greatest affection.

Colin

It's preposterous.

Stella

After the first shock I'm almost inclined to laugh. Really, Nurse, you must be very nervous and overwrought to have got such an idea in your head. Is that why you were so funny when I asked you to accept enough money to take a year's holiday?

Nurse

I had no wish that the matter should go so far now. If Dr. Harvester had agreed to my suggestion of having a post-mortem nothing need have been said till it was discovered if my suspicions were justified or not.

Harvester

Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike, Nurse Wayland.

Nurse

(*Turning on him.*) You have forced me into this position, Dr. Harvester. I only did my duty in telling

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you my very grave suspicions, and the moment I did, you took up a definitely hostile attitude towards me.

Harvester

Well, if you want to know, I thought you silly, nervous, and hysterical. Good heavens, I've been in practice long enough to know how wildly people talk. I should be kept pretty busy if I paid any attention, for instance, to what one woman says about another.

Nurse

Or is it that you're frightened to death of a scandal? You know that notoriety does a doctor no good, and you think it would hurt your practice if anything came of this that got into the papers. You don't want to have a post-mortem because if there is anything you don't want to know it. Deny it if you can.

Harvester

I admit I shouldn't welcome publicity. I put all the money I had into buying my practice and I don't suppose it would do it any good if I were mixed up in an unpleasant case.

Mrs. Tabret

People want their doctor to be like their central heating: efficient, but not obtrusive.

Harvester

But I can honestly say that if it were my duty I wouldn't let my own interests stop me from doing

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it. In this case I don't think it is my duty. I am quite satisfied that there is no reason why I shouldn't sign the necessary documents.

Colin

All that is neither here nor there. Nurse Wayland has presumably some grounds for her statement. Perhaps she'd better give them.

Liconda

Yes, she has. I thought it better she should speak before all concerned.

Nurse

It was my wish to do so. I don't want to do anything underhand.

Stella

Go on, Nurse Wayland.

Nurse

(*To LICONDA.*) I daresay you know that Mr. Maurice often had bouts of sleeplessness. Dr. Harvester had prescribed various sedatives. But he found that chloralin was the one he supported best. (*To HARVESTER.*) Is that true?

Harvester

Quite. Chloralin is a new preparation in tabloid form. It's more convenient than the liquid chloral we've been in the habit of using. I explained to Maurice the

THE SACRED FLAME

danger of his growing dependent on drugs and begged him not to take a dose without my permission or Nurse Wayland's.

Nurse

I'm quite sure that he never did.

Harvester

So am I. He was very sensible and he understood my point. He certainly wasn't lacking in self-control.

Nurse

Will you tell Major Liconda what instructions you gave me last night?

Harvester

He was excited and wrought up. I asked Nurse Wayland to give him a tabloid and told him that if he woke in the night he could take it. I thought he'd probably drop off for half an hour or so and then wake up and not be able to get to sleep again.

Nurse

I dissolved a tabloid in half a glass of water and put it by his side. I noticed that there were only five tabloids left in the bottle and I made up my mind to order some more. This morning the bottle was empty.

Stella

(*Puzzled.*) That's very strange.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

Very!

Harvester

How did you happen to notice?

Nurse

I was tidying up. I thought it better to put away all the medicines and dressings and so on.

Stella

(*To HARVESTER.*) Would five tabloids have a fatal effect?

Nurse

Six. I left one dissolved in water by the side of his bed.

Harvester

Yes, there's little doubt that the effect would be fatal.

Stella

It's all incredible. It's surely much more likely that someone took them for his own use.

Colin

Are you absolutely sure that last night the bottle contained five tabloids?

Nurse

Absolutely. If anyone took them for his own use it must have been after I went to bed.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

But no one went into Maurice's room last night after that but me. I went in to say good-night to him.

Liconda

How do you know that no one else went into his room?

Stella

Who could have? There was only Colin and Mother.

Liconda

(*To MRS. TABRET.*) You went upstairs as I was letting myself out, Millie.

Mrs. Tabret

I was very tired. (*With the shadow of a smile.*) I didn't see any reason to wait while Colin and Stella and the Doctor ate a bacon sandwich.

Liconda

You didn't go into Maurice's room last night, Colin?

Colin

No, why should I? I don't want a sleeping-draught to make me sleep.

Stella

You're not under the impression that I took the tabloids, I suppose, Nurse Wayland?

Harvester

If you had you could presumably produce at least four of them. Believe me, if you'd taken twenty-five

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grains of chloralin at midnight you wouldn't be standing there now.

Nurse

The fact remains that five tabloids disappeared last night. Where are they?

Harvester

There's always the possibility that they were taken maliciously by someone who wanted to make trouble.

Nurse

Do you mean me, Dr. Harvester? What do you think I can get out of making trouble? Really I don't know how such a stupid idea can have crossed your mind. Why should I have asked you to have a post-mortem if I knew for certain—as I must if I'd taken the tabloids out of sheer malice—that it would discover nothing?

Colin

Isn't it possible that they could have been taken by somebody this morning?

Liconda

Who?

Colin

The housemaid, for instance.

Liconda

Chloralin is not a very common drug. I shouldn't have thought a housemaid would ever have heard of it. It's not as though it were aspirin or veronal.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

I don't know about that. There have been cases in the papers. It's not safe to take it for granted that a housemaid wouldn't have got into the habit of taking something when she couldn't sleep.

Stella

Well, it's very easy to make sure. It's Alice who did Maurice's room. Let us send for her.

Nurse

That is unnecessary. She was frightened at the idea of going in. I told her she need not and said I would clean up the room and put everything to rights myself. I'm quite sure she has not been in this morning.

Stella

What are we to do, Mother?

Mrs. Tabret

You must do exactly what you think fit.

Liconda

(*To the Doctor.*) Is it possible that Maurice can have died from chloral poisoning?

Harvester

I have told you that I am satisfied that death was due to natural causes.

Liconda

I wasn't asking that.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

Yes, of course, it's possible. But I don't for an instant believe it.

Nurse

I know that this must add awfully to your grief, Mrs. Tabret. I can't tell you how sorry I am. It seems dreadful that I should have to repay all your kindness to me by increasing your troubles.

Mrs. Tabret

My dear, I'm quite ready to believe that you will do nothing and say nothing but what you think is right.

Stella

I'm all confused. It's come as such a dreadful shock. (*To the NURSE.*) Do you *really* think that Maurice died of an overdose of his sleeping-draught?

Nurse

(*Very deliberately, looking her straight in the eyes.*)
I do.

Stella

It's awful.

Nurse

(*Still looking at STELLA.*) I think I should tell you that when I found the tabloids were missing I looked in the glass in which I'd dissolved the one I'd prepared for him. There was still about a dessert spoonful

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of liquid in the bottom of it. I have put it aside and I suggest that it should be analyzed.

Mrs. Tabret

(*With faint mockery.*) You are wasted on your profession, Nurse Wayland. You have all the makings of a detective.

Liconda

But wouldn't a draught in which half a dozen tabloids had been dissolved be very unpalatable?

Harvester

It would be rather bitter. I suppose if one swallowed it down at a gulp one would hardly notice till one had already drunk it.

Stella

It all sounds very circumstantial. I'm afraid there's a dreadful probability in Nurse Wayland's story.

Colin

But my dear, it's absurd. Who on earth would have thought of murdering Maurice? It's out of the question.

Stella

Oh, that, yes. I wasn't thinking of that. Nurse Wayland can't seriously think that anyone deliberately gave Maurice an overdose of his sleeping-draught. But I'm beginning to be desperately afraid that perhaps he took it himself.

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Harvester

Suicide?

Stella

(*With distress.*) He wasn't himself last night. He was very strange. I'd never seen him so nervous.

Liconda

Was there any reason for that?

Stella

(*After a moment's hesitation.*) I'm afraid so. You see I'd been to Tristan. And we'd seen it together the night we got engaged. It upset him to think of the past.

Liconda

Did he speak of suicide?

Stella

No.

Liconda

Had he ever done so?

Stella

Never. I don't believe it had entered his head.

Liconda

What made you think he was upset last night?

Stella

(*Much moved.*) He did a thing he'd never done before. It was dreadfully painful. He cried. He cried in my arms.

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Nurse

Why, exactly?

Stella

(*Desperately.*) Really, Miss Wayland, there are some things I can't tell you. What passed between my husband and myself was between ourselves. It concerned nobody but us.

Nurse

I beg your pardon. I should have thought it better for your own sake to be frank.

Stella

What do you mean? Are you accusing me of holding anything back?

Nurse

I'm not accusing anybody.

Liconda

My dear, I won't ask you anything that is painful for you to answer. But there's just this. If there's anything in what Miss Wayland says I suppose there'll have to be an inquest. The coroner will certainly ask you if your husband said anything at all that might indicate that suicide was in his mind.

Stella

(*With a deep sigh.*) He said it would have been better if the accident had killed him outright. But he wasn't thinking of himself, he was thinking of me.

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Liconda

That's very important.

Stella

Oh, Nurse, don't be hard on us. Don't be vindictive because I've been rather sharp with you. My nerves are all on edge to-day. After all, it's rather natural, isn't it? If poor Maurice did take an overdose of something, can't you square it with your conscience to say nothing about it? He had so little to live for. Can't you spare us the distress and horror of a post-mortem and an inquest?

Liconda

The question is if Dr. Harvester is still willing to sign the death certificate.

Harvester

I think Nurse Wayland may very well have been mistaken about the tabloids. I can see no reason why I shouldn't.

Nurse

(*Deliberately.*) But you see, I am quite convinced that Maurice Tabret did not commit suicide.

Liconda

For what reason?

Nurse

Well, here's one of them. There was a little liquid still in the glass from which he drank. About a dessert

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spoonful. You remember I mentioned that, and I put the glass away so that the liquid could be examined.

Liconda

Yes.

Nurse

Surely if a man were going to commit suicide he would drink the entire contents of the glass either in one gulp or two. He wouldn't risk making a bad job of what he was about by leaving something at the bottom. Least of all a man like Maurice Tabret.

Colin

That seems very far-fetched to me.

Liconda

I must say it seems rather a small point.

Colin

Besides, the stuff hasn't been analyzed yet.

Liconda

Is your conviction based on nothing more than that, Nurse Wayland?

Nurse

No, it is not. Although Maurice Tabret was very good and I didn't believe he would ever take a tabloid without leave, one knows that it's very easy to get into the habit of drug-taking and then you can't be certain about anyone. Isn't that so, Dr. Harvester?

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Harvester

Yes, I suppose it is.

Nurse

Sometimes he was terribly depressed. I didn't think it wise to let him have within reach the power of putting an end to himself.

Stella

I never saw him depressed.

Nurse

(*Bitterly.*) I know you didn't. You never saw anything.

Stella

Nurse Wayland, what have I done to you? Why do you talk to me like that? Your face is all twisted with hate of me. I don't understand.

Nurse

Don't you?

(*The two women stare at one another for a moment, then STELLA gives a little shudder and turns her head away.*)

Stella

I'm beginning to be frightened of you. What sort of a woman are you that we've had in this house for five years?

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Mrs. Tabret

(*In a soothing tone.*) There's nothing to be frightened of, darling. Don't give way to your nerves.

Nurse

(*To STELLA.*) Because he joked and laughed when you were there, did it never occur to you that there were moments when he was overwhelmed with black misery?

Stella

(*With deep sympathy.*) Poor lamb, why did he insist on hiding it from me?

Nurse

(*With a sort of restrained violence.*) His one aim was to make his suffering easy for *you* to bear. Whatever pain he had, he hid from you so that you shouldn't have the distress of being sorry for him.

Stella

It's dreadful that you should say such things. You make me feel that I was so cruel to him.

Nurse

(*With increasing bitterness.*) Everything had to be hidden from you. When you were coming the medicine bottles and the dressings had to be put away, so that there should be nothing to remind you that there was anything the matter with him.

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Stella

I would willingly have done everything for him that you did. It was his most earnest wish that I shouldn't concern myself with the horrid part of his illness.

Mrs. Tabret

That is true, Nurse. I'm sorry you don't think that Stella did all she could for Maurice. As his mother I'm perhaps no less competent to judge than you. I have only admiration for her unselfishness and consideration.

Stella

Oh, Mother.

Mrs. Tabret

I always think we do best by people when we help them in the way they want to be helped rather than in the way we may think they should be helped. I would sooner someone gave me a vanity bag that I hankered after than a shawl to wrap round my old bones that I didn't happen to want.

Liconda

There's something in that, Nurse Wayland.

Mrs. Tabret

I'm sure that Stella did Maurice most good by answering him back in the same strain when he chaffed her and when he laughed, laughing with him.

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Nurse

I was nothing. I was only his paid nurse. He didn't try to hide from me the despair that filled his heart. He didn't have to pretend to me. He didn't have to be good-tempered or amusing with me. He could be morose and he knew I wouldn't mind. He could quarrel with me and then say he was sorry if he'd hurt me and know he couldn't hurt me. To make you laugh he plastered his face with flour and painted his nose red and jumped through a hoop. You only saw the white mask of the clown; I saw his naked, tortured, triumphant soul.

Stella

(*The truth dawning on her, the truth that the NURSE had loved him.*) What are you telling us, Nurse Wayland?

Nurse

I'm telling the truth at last.

Stella

I wonder if you know what strange truth it is.

Liconda

But, Nurse, what you've been saying suggests that he did have at least moments of despair when he must have thought of suicide. We know that he was overwrought last night. If his death was not due to natural

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causes surely it's extremely likely that he brought it about himself.

Nurse

It was just one of those moments that I was on my guard against. The chloralin was kept in the bathroom on an upper shelf that he could not possibly have got at. I had to stand on a chair myself to reach it.

Liconda

If a man is determined to do a thing he can often surmount difficulties that others would have thought insuperable.

Nurse

Ask Dr. Harvester if it would have been possible for Maurice Tabret to cross the room and go into the bathroom and stand up on a chair.

Harvester

He had absolutely no power in the lower part of his body. His back was broken by the accident and the spinal cord terribly injured.

Liconda

Couldn't he have crawled into the bathroom?

Harvester

With a great deal of difficulty. Yes, I think he might have done that.

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Nurse

Could he have stood up on a chair?

Harvester

No, I'm bound to admit that is absolutely out of the question.

Liconda

If he'd got into the bathroom, couldn't he have fished down the bottle with a stick or something?

Harvester

Perhaps.

Nurse

Why do you say that, Dr. Harvester? You know that he couldn't sit upright without help.

Harvester

I'm not so anxious to put the worst construction on everything as you seem to be, Nurse Wayland.

Nurse

And if he'd got the bottle down, how could he have put it up in its place again?

Harvester

(*Irritably.*) After all, we don't know yet that Maurice died of an overdose of chloralin.

Liconda

The matter can't be left like this, Harvester. I'm afraid there'll have to be an inquest.

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Harvester

Yes, obviously, I can't sign the death certificate now. I shall have to communicate with the coroner.

Nurse

I'm sorry, Dr. Harvester.

Harvester

I bet you are. I suppose you think it's very self-seeking of me not to want to be mixed up in a scandal. I suppose I ought to laugh through a horse collar at the prospect of smashing up a practice that I paid good money for and have spent seven years in building up.

Liconda

Oh, come now, it's not going to be as bad as that. However distressing an inquiry may be to Maurice's family, I don't see how it can affect his doctor. For a hopeless invalid to take an overdose of his sleeping-draught is not so uncommon as to excite much comment.

Harvester

That, no.

Liconda

Many of us can only admire a man who has a fatal illness and prefers to end his life painlessly rather than endure useless suffering. He is more merciful to himself and to those he loves.

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Nurse

Dr. Harvester knows as well as I do that if Maurice Tabret died of an overdose of chloralin he couldn't have taken it himself. There's only one word for it and you all know it. It was murder.

Harvester

That's why I'm absolutely convinced that he died of natural causes. I can't offer an explanation of the disappearance of those damned tabloids, but there must be an explanation.

Colin

The most likely one is that Nurse Wayland was mistaken. Surely it's only reasonable to suppose that if anyone had taken out half a dozen tabloids he would have put others in their place, aspirin or chlorate of potash or something, so that they wouldn't be missed.

Nurse

People don't think of everything. It's only because a murderer makes some mistake that he's caught.

Harvester

But, damn it all, no one commits a murder without a motive. No one had the smallest reason to wish Maurice dead.

Nurse

How do you know?

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Harvester

Good God, how do I know that two and two are four? I know that everybody was devoted to him. And with reason, damn it. He was the best fellow in the world.

Nurse

Did you know that his wife was going to have a baby?

Stella

(With a gasp.) You fiend!

Colin

(Aghast.) Stella!

Nurse

I suspected it last night when she nearly fainted. This morning I knew for certain.

Stella

What do you mean? Are you accusing me of having murdered my husband?

Liconda

(Very gravely.) Is it true what she says, Stella?

(There is a pause. STELLA does not speak. There is anguish in her eyes. ALICE, the parlourmaid, comes briskly in, breaking the tension with the affairs of every day.)

Alice

Shall I keep lunch back, madam?

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Mrs. Tabret

Is it one o'clock? No, you can serve up.

Colin

We can't have lunch, now, Mother.

Mrs. Tabret

Why not? Lay for two extra. Major Liconda and Dr. Harvester will be lunching.

Alice

Very good, madam.

(She goes out.)

Colin

Mother, it's impossible. How can we all sit down together as though nothing had happened?

Mrs. Tabret

I think it's just as well. We have a great deal more to say to one another. It will do none of us any harm to talk of other things for half an hour.

Stella

I couldn't, I couldn't. Let me stay here.

Mrs. Tabret

(Firmly.) I insist on your coming, my dear.

Harvester

I must bolt round to my house, Mrs. Tabret. I'll have a bite there and come back immediately afterwards.

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Mrs. Tabret

Very well.

Liconda

My dear, I couldn't think of imposing myself on you.

Mrs. Tabret

(*With a grim smile.*) You must eat. Will you come, Nurse Wayland?

Nurse

No.

Mrs. Tabret

I'll have something sent up to your room.

Nurse

I want nothing.

Mrs. Tabret

You may when it comes.

(*ALICE comes in again.*)

Alice

Lunch is served, madam.

Mrs. Tabret

(*Giving STELLA her hand.*) Come, Stella.

THE END OF ACT TWO

The Sacred Flame: Act Three

ACT THREE

THE SCENE *is the same as in the preceding acts.*

Half an hour has passed.

STELLA *is standing at one of the windows looking into the garden. COLIN comes in from the hall and she turns round.*

Colin

Stella.

Stella

Have you finished already?

Colin

More or less. I told Mother I wanted to see if you were all right.

Stella

Yes, I'm all right.

Colin

It was awful sitting there as though nothing had happened. I don't know what induced Mother to make us go through that farce.

Stella

(*With a shrug.*) I daresay it was very sensible. With the servants there it was obvious that we had to hold

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our tongues. It gave us all a chance to collect ourselves.

Colin

I'm afraid you didn't eat a thing.

Stella

(*Smiling.*) You ate enough for both of us.

Colin

Did you think it was rotten of me?

Stella

No, I think it comforted me. To see you wolf down great mouthfuls of lamb and green peas made me realize that this nightmare isn't the whole of things. The world is going on all around us. Whatever we may be suffering the busses are going down Piccadilly and the trains are running in and out of Paddington Station.

Colin

Stella, is it true?

Stella

Is what true?

Colin

What that woman said.

Stella

About the baby? I suppose so. Yes, it's true.

Colin

Oh, Stella.

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Stella

I wasn't sure. I was afraid. I thought it might be a false alarm. It's only quite lately that I've been certain.

Colin

Why didn't you tell me?

Stella

I didn't want to.

Colin

Not at all? Were you going to let me go away without knowing?

Stella

It was only a month before you were going back to Guatemala. I didn't want to spoil those last weeks for you. Because I worried there didn't seem to be any reason why you should be worried, too.

Colin

But what were you going to do?

Stella

I don't know. I was looking for some way out. I thought it would be easier when you were gone. Whatever happened, I thought I'd like to keep you out of it.

Colin

Why?

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Stella

I don't know, unless because I love you.

Colin

Aren't I there to share your troubles with you?

Stella

I suppose women are very silly, when they tell a man that they're going to have a child by him, it seems rather an important moment to them. I suppose they feel happy and a little frightened and awed. They want to be made a fuss of. I couldn't expect you to feel joy or pride, but only consternation.

Colin

Oh, my sweetness, don't you know how devotedly I love you?

Stella

No, don't. Don't say anything that's going to upset me. I don't want to get emotional. If we've got to talk it over we'd better try to talk it over as calmly as we can.

Colin

What is that dreadful woman going to say now?

Stella

I don't know. I don't care . . . I don't know why I say that. I'm frightened to death.

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Colin

You must keep a stiff upper lip.

Stella

Oh, Colin, whatever happens you'll stand by me, won't you?

Colin

Yes, I swear it.

(DR. HARVESTER *comes in from the garden.*)

Harvester

Oh, have you finished your luncheon already?

Stella

(*Forcing a smile to her lips.*) I'm afraid I couldn't make much of a pretence at eating. I wanted to be alone for a minute and came in here.

Colin

I think Mother and Major Liconda will be here directly. They were just starting coffee when I left them.

Harvester

Where's Nurse Wayland? I came back rather soon because I thought I'd like to have a chat with her alone.

Stella

Colin will go and fetch her. I suppose she lunched in her room.

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Colin

Right-ho.

(He goes out.)

Harvester

I say, my dear, I hope this is going to come out all right.

Stella

It doesn't look much like it, does it?

Harvester

My word, you're cool.

Stella

When the earth is opening under your feet and the heavens are falling it doesn't seem much use to run about like a frightened hen.

Harvester

Do you mind my giving you a bit of advice?

Stella

(With a shade of irony.) I'd welcome it, but I think it's very unlikely I shall take it.

Harvester

Well, it's just this, if I were you I'd take very great care not to say anything to put up Nurse Wayland's back.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

She can't very well make things much more disagreeable than she has already.

Harvester

I'm not so sure of that. That's why I wanted to see her alone. You know she's not a bad sort, really. Now that she's had half an hour to calm down, I don't see why she shouldn't be more reasonable.

Stella

I wouldn't count on it in your place.

Harvester

I don't myself see what Nurse Wayland has to get out of making a fuss.

Stella

She's a very conscientious woman and she mistakes her hatred of me for the call of duty.

Harvester

The good are difficult to get on with, aren't they?

Stella

(*Smiling.*) Fortunately they're so few, it's not often they seriously inconvenience the rest of us.

Harvester

Nurse Wayland has got her knife into you all right.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Dr. Harvester, will you tell me something?

Harvester

If I can.

Stella

Do you think it possible that Maurice could have guessed—my condition?

Harvester

I shouldn't think so.

Stella

I'm so thankful. I couldn't have borne the thought that he died rather than expose me to shame and disgrace. He was capable of it, you know.

Harvester

I'm afraid that if Maurice died of an overdose of chloral he can't have taken it himself.

Stella

But who could have given it him?

Harvester

That is the question, isn't it?

Stella

Wild and fantastic notions pass through my mind and one is more incredible than the other.

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

I know.

Stella

Why couldn't that wretched woman leave me for a moment alone with my sorrow? My heart is burning with grief. I reproach myself so bitterly. I'm so ashamed of myself. You never knew Maurice in the old days. He was such a gallant figure. When I was in his room just now before all this horror burst upon us, I wept for myself as well as him. I wept for all the love I'd borne him in years gone by. Oh, how cruel death is.

Harvester

I know. However often your trade brings you in contact with it, you are overcome with the same dismay. It's so desperately final.

Stella

I can't believe that it's final. It would be too unfair. Why shouldn't it be true what Maurice believed—that we are born again? Will you think me silly and childish if I tell you something? I have a strange, mystical feeling that that brave spirit has entered into the child that I shall bear, and that in him Maurice, forgiving me the wrong I did him, will live out the life that was his due.

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Harvester

There are some who think that if you only believe enough that a thing is true, it becomes true. Who am I to decide such matters?

(The door is opened and COLIN comes in immediately followed by the NURSE.)

Colin

Here is Nurse Wayland.

Stella

Oh, Nurse, Dr. Harvester wishes to speak to you by himself. Colin and I will go into the garden.

Nurse

It's very kind of you. But I have nothing private to say to Dr. Harvester and I do not wish to listen to anything Dr. Harvester has to say that anyone else may not hear. I want to do nothing underhand.

Harvester

I'm not going to ask you to do anything underhand.

Nurse

I know exactly what you want to say to me. You're going to point out that everyone here has been very kind to me and very generous. And they're prepared to be still kinder and still more generous. And if I make a scandal I shall be exposed to every sort of un-

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pleasantness and very likely have great difficulty in getting another job. On the other hand, if I hold my tongue I can go to Japan and have a good time. Well, I won't.

Stella

(*Coolly.*) That seems very definite.

Harvester

All the same, I don't see how it can hurt you to listen to me for five minutes.

Stella

Now I put my foot down. I'm not prepared to allow an appeal on my behalf to be made to Nurse Wayland.

Colin

I think I hear my mother and the major.

Harvester

Then it's too late.

(COLIN goes over to the door and opens it for them.)

MRS. TABRET and MAJOR LICONDA enter.)

Mrs. Tabret

Have we kept you waiting? I hope you had everything you wanted in your room, Nurse.

Nurse

Everything, thank you, Mrs. Tabret.

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Mrs. Tabret

Won't you sit down? There's no use in your tiring yourself.

Nurse

(*Sitting down.*) Thank you.

Mrs. Tabret

Have you been talking things over?

Harvester

I've only just come, Mrs. Tabret.

Mrs. Tabret

I suppose we are in Nurse Wayland's hands. What have you decided to do, Nurse Wayland?

Nurse

I must do what I think is my duty, Mrs. Tabret.

Mrs. Tabret

Of course. We should all do our duty, and how difficult it would be if at the same time we did not often make ourselves a trifle disagreeable to others.

Nurse

Mrs. Tabret, Major Liconda asked your daughter-in-law a question just before luncheon. She didn't answer it.

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Liconda

(*To STELLA.*) I am afraid you must have thought me very impertinent. Nurse Wayland said that you were going to have a baby, and I asked you if it was true.

Stella

It's quite true.

Liconda

(*Struggling with his embarrassment.*) I'm in a very false position. I am conscious that I am interfering in matters that are no affair of mine.

Stella

My dear Major, I know that you are kindness itself. You've known Mrs. Tabret for ages and Maurice and Colin when they were small boys.

Liconda

All the same you must see how difficult it is for me to ask the question that inevitably rises in one's mind.

Stella

I'll answer without your asking. Of course it's quite impossible that Maurice should have been the father of the child I'm going to have. Since his accident he has been my husband only in name.

Colin

(*Going up to her and putting his hand round her shoulders.*) I am the father, Major Liconda.

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Nurse

(*Astounded.*) You?

Mrs. Tabret

(*Ironically.*) Do you mean to say that it escaped your sharp eyes, Nurse, that Colin and Stella were in love with one another?

Stella

(*With a little frightened gasp.*) Did you know?

Mrs. Tabret

I think nowadays the young are apt to think their elders even more stupid than advancing years generally make them.

Stella

Oh, Mother, what must you think of me?

Mrs. Tabret

(*Drily.*) Do you very much care?

Stella

I suppose I ought to be terribly ashamed of myself. I must be sincere. I don't want to make a pretence of remorse that I don't feel. I can no more help loving Colin than I can help the rain falling or the trees bursting into leaf. I'm proud of the child he's given me.

Nurse

You're shameless.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

(*To MRS. TABRET.*) But *you* have every right to think that I treated Maurice abominably. He's beyond the reach of pain, but I bitterly regret the pain I've caused you. I have no excuses to make for myself.

Mrs. Tabret

My dear, don't you remember what I said to you last night? I thanked you for all you had done for Maurice. Did you think I was talking at random? I knew then that you were going to have a baby and that Colin was its father.

Colin

Mother, I blame myself so awfully.

Stella

You mustn't do that, darling. (*To MRS. TABRET.*) If a woman doesn't want a man to make love to her she can very easily prevent it. Living side by side, in the same house for so many months, there's no reason why he should ever have looked upon me as anything but his sister. I was shameless. I didn't prevent him from making love to me because I wanted him to make love to me. I made him love me.

Colin

Oh, Stella, how could I help loving you? I don't blame myself for that. I blame myself because when I knew I loved you I didn't bolt.

THE SACRED FLAME

Mrs. Tabret

Am I right in thinking that then it was too late?

Colin

Do you remember, when we were kids in India they used to tell us of children who could recollect their past lives. They'd know who was who in the village and recognize the things that had belonged to them before and go straight to places that otherwise they couldn't have found. That's how I felt when I fell in love with Stella. I felt that I'd loved her always and that her love was home to me.

Stella

Whatever you may think of me, Mother, and however badly you think I've behaved, I ask you to believe that I didn't give myself to Colin to gratify any passing whim. I loved him with all my heart.

Mrs. Tabret

My dear, I know. You say you made him love you. Why do you say that except that you love him so much? You can't persuade yourself that this miracle should have happened that he loves you, too, unless you had done it. Love is always diffident. One can never be certain of love, one can only be certain of affection.

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Stella

You mustn't think I didn't struggle against the madness that possessed me. I said to myself that the only return I could make Maurice for all the devotion he gave me was by remaining faithful to him and loyal.

Mrs. Tabret

I'm sure you did.

Stella

I told myself that Maurice was a cripple, bedridden, sick, the victim of an unforeseen misfortune, and that it would be foul of me to betray him. I tried to drive Colin away. I was beastly to him, rude and sarcastic, and then the dumb misery in his eyes broke my heart. I did everything except ask him to go. I couldn't do that. I couldn't. I pretended to myself that it was on your account and on Maurice's. You hadn't seen him for so long. Maurice was so pleased to have him here.

Mrs. Tabret

It's quite true that I hadn't seen Colin for a long time, and Maurice was tremendously pleased to have him here.

Nurse

(*With exasperation.*) I don't understand you, Mrs. Tabret. You seem to be going out of your way to find excuses for your daughter-in-law. If you knew what was going on, why didn't you stop it?

THE SACRED FLAME

Mrs. Tabret

I'm afraid I shall shock you, Miss Wayland, I want to put it as delicately as I can, but it's a matter that we English have made indelicate by prudishness and hypocrisy. Stella is young, healthy, and normal. Why should I imagine she has not got the instincts that I had at her age? The sexual instinct is as normal as hunger and as pressing as the desire to sleep. Why should she be deprived of its satisfaction?

Nurse

(*With a little shiver of disgust.*) It seems to me that the modern world is obsessed by sex. Is there nothing else in it? After all, the answer is that you can't go without food and you can't go without sleep. But you can go without the satisfaction of your sexual appetites.

Harvester

But at what price of nervous disorders, crabbedness, and unhealthy emotions.

Mrs. Tabret

When Maurice's accident made it impossible for him and Stella ever to live again as man and wife I asked myself if she would be able to support so false a relationship. They had loved one another as two healthy young things love. Their love was deep and passionate, but it was rooted in sex. It might have come about

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with time that it would have acquired a more spiritual character, it might have been that the inevitable trials of life endured together would have given birth to an affection and a confidence in one another that might have given a new glow to the fading fires of passion. They did not have the time.

Nurse

(*To STELLA, with irony.*) May I ask how long you'd been married?

Stella

I was married to Maurice about a year before he crashed.

Nurse

A year. A whole year.

Mrs. Tabret

Out of his suffering a new love did spring up in Maurice's heart, a hungry, clinging, dependent love. I didn't know how long Stella would be content with that.

Nurse

(*Bitterly.*) No one could say that you had much trust in human nature.

Mrs. Tabret

I have a great deal. As much, in fact, as experience has taught me is justified. I knew that Stella's pity was infinite.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Oh, infinite. Poor lamb.

Mrs. Tabret

I knew it was so great that she mistook it for love, and I prayed that she would never find out her mistake. She meant everything in the world to Maurice. Everything. At first it was easier when we were struggling for his life, but when he settled down to being a chronic invalid and we knew that he would never be anything else I was seized with a great fear. I feared that the time would come when she felt she couldn't stand any longer the miserable life that was all he had to offer her. If she wanted to go I felt we hadn't the right to prevent her, and I knew that if she went Maurice would die.

Stella

I would never have left him. It never entered my head that it was possible.

Mrs. Tabret

I saw the strain that it began to be on her nerves. She was as kind as ever, and as gentle, but it was an effort, and what is the good you do worth unless you do it naturally as the flowers give their scent?

Nurse

I have never been given to understand that good is only good if it's easy to do.

THE SACRED FLAME

Mrs. Tabret

I don't suppose it is, but if it's difficult then I think it benefits the person who does it rather than the person it's done to. That is why it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Nurse

I don't understand you. I think what you say is odious and cynical.

Mrs. Tabret

Then I'm afraid you'll think what I'm going to say now even more cynical and odious. I found myself half wishing that Stella should take a lover.

Nurse

(*With horror.*) Mrs. Tabret!

Mrs. Tabret

I was willing to shut my eyes to anything so long as she stayed with Maurice. I wanted her to be kind and thoughtful and affectionate to him, and I didn't care for the rest.

Nurse

(*Brokenly.*) I had such a deep respect for you, Mrs. Tabret. I admired you so much. I used to think that when I was your age I'd like to be a woman like you.

Mrs. Tabret

When Colin came back and after a while I realized that he and Stella were in love with one another, I did

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nothing to prevent the almost inevitable consequences. I didn't deliberately say it to myself in so many words, that would have shocked me, but in my heart was a feeling that this would make it all right for Maurice. She wouldn't go now. She was bound to this house by a stronger tie than pity or kindness.

Liconda

Didn't it strike you what great dangers you were exposing them to?

Mrs. Tabret

I didn't care. I only thought of Maurice. When they were children I think I loved them equally. But since his accident I haven't had room in my heart for anyone but Maurice. He was everything to me. For him I was prepared to sacrifice Colin and Stella. (*With a little gesture of appeal to STELLA.*) I hope they'll forgive me.

Stella

Oh, my dear, as though there was anything for me to forgive.

Nurse

You'll only laugh at me if I say I'm shocked. I can't help it. I'm shocked to the very depths of my soul.

Mrs. Tabret

I was afraid you would be.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

I would have gone to the stake for my belief that no unclean thought had ever entered your head. Didn't it revolt you to think that your son's wife was having an affair with a man under your own roof?

Mrs. Tabret

I suppose I'm not very easily revolted. I've lived too long abroad to think that my own standard of right and wrong is the only one possible. We all know nowadays that morality isn't one and the same in all countries and at all times. There are many things, for instance, that we think right here and they think wrong in India . . .

Liconda

And contrariwise.

Mrs. Tabret

But I wonder why people don't see that morality isn't the same for everyone at the same time in the same country. I'm not sure that I'd go as far as to say that there's a morality for the rich and a morality for the poor, though I'm doubtful, but I do think there's a morality for the young and a morality for the old. Perhaps we should all look upon these matters very differently if our moral rules hadn't been made by persons who had forgotten the passion and the high spirits of youth. Do you think it so very wicked if

THE SACRED FLAME

two young things surrender to the instincts that nature has planted in them?

Nurse

Did the probable result never occur to you?

Mrs. Tabret

A baby? It persuades me of Stella's essential innocence. If she'd been a loose or abandoned woman she would have known how to avoid such an accident.

Nurse

(*Sardonically.*) You must admit at all events that Maurice's death has come in the very nick of time to get her out of a very awkward predicament.

Stella

Nurse, what a cruel—what a heartless thing to say.

Liconda

(*Sternly.*) You must be very careful, Nurse. That sounds extremely like an accusation.

Nurse

I wanted to accuse nobody. Do me the justice to admit that I started by saying that I was not satisfied with the circumstances and thought there should be a post-mortem. That was my right and my duty. Isn't that so, Dr. Harvester?

THE SACRED FLAME

Harvester

I suppose it is.

Nurse

You've forced me to this. You asked me who could have a motive for murdering Maurice Tabret. In self-defence I was obliged to tell you that his wife was going to have a child of which he couldn't be the father.

Stella

You talk of your duty, Miss Wayland. Are you sure that your motive for all this is anything more than your bitter hatred of me?

Nurse

(*Scornfully.*) Why should I hate you? Believe me, I only despise you.

Stella

You hate me because you were in love with Maurice.

Nurse

(*Violently.*) I? What do you mean? You're insulting me. How dare you say that?

Stella

(*Coolly.*) You gave it away. It had often seemed to me that you were fonder of Maurice than a nurse generally is of her patient and I used to chaff him about it. It never struck me that it was serious till

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this morning. Then you betrayed yourself in every word you said. You were madly in love with Maurice.

Nurse

(*Defiantly.*) And if I was, what of it?

Stella

Nothing, except that it's my turn to be shocked. I think it was rather horrible and disgusting.

Nurse

(*With increasing emotion.*) Yes, I loved him. My love grew as I saw yours fade. I loved him because he was so helpless and so dependent on me. I loved him because he was like a child in my arms. I never showed him my love, I would sooner have died, and I was ashamed because sometimes I thought, notwithstanding everything, he saw it. But if he saw it he understood and was sorry for me. He knew how bitter it is to long for the love of someone who has no love to give you. My love meant nothing to him, he had no room in his heart for any love but the love of you, and you had no use for it. He asked for bread and you gave him a stone. You think you were so kind and considerate. If you'd loved him as I loved him you'd have seen how less than nothing was all you did for him. I could think of a hundred ways to give him happiness, they would have meant nothing to him, and you hadn't the love to think of them.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Miss Wayland, I'm sorry for what I said just now. It was stupid of me and rather horrid. I suppose there is something beautiful in love of whatever kind it is. Will you let me thank you for the love you gave my husband?

Nurse

(*Violently.*) No, it's an impertinence to offer me your thanks.

Stella

I'm sorry you should think that . . . It's quite true that I didn't love Maurice, at least not with the love of a woman for a man. I'm deeply conscious of the fact, and often I reproached myself because I couldn't feel—what at one moment I hadn't been able to help feeling. It seemed so ungrateful and so unkind. He was no more to me than a very dear friend for whom I was desperately sorry.

Nurse

Do you think he wanted your pity?

Stella

I know he didn't. But pity was all I had to give him. Who was it that said that pity was akin to love? There's all the world between them.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

(*With angry vehemence.*) Yes, all the hideousness of sex.

Stella

And do you believe there was nothing of sex in your love for Maurice? It was because I felt that there was in it an abnormal aborted sexuality that at the first moment it gave me a little shiver of repulsion.

Nurse

(*With a passionate emotion.*) No. No. My love for that poor boy was as pure and as spiritual as my love for God. There was never a shadow of self in it. My love was compassion and Christian charity. I never asked anything but to be allowed to serve and tend him. It was a sufficient reward for me to be able to wash and dry his poor wasted limbs and to hold the mirror in front of him while he shaved. I never touched his lips till they were cold in death. And now I've lost everything that made life lovely to me. What was he to you? What was he to his mother? To me he was my child, my friend, my lover, my god. And you killed him.

Stella

That's a lie!

Liconda

Come, Nurse Wayland, you have no right to say that.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

(Beside herself.) It's true and you know it!

Liconda

(Impatiently.) I know nothing of the kind. I only know that you've worked yourself into a state in which you are saying all sorts of things for which you have no justification.

Stella

(With a tolerant shrug of the shoulders.) My dear, I could no more have killed Maurice than I could walk a tight rope. Doesn't it occur to you that there was nothing to prevent my leaving him? Who could have blamed me?

Nurse

How would you have lived? You haven't a penny of your own. I've heard you tell Maurice a hundred times that you had to mind your p's and q's because he was your only means of livelihood.

Stella

I certainly shouldn't have repeated a feeble little joke so often. I suppose I could have worked.

Nurse

(Scornfully.) You.

Stella

I've often noticed that the average woman who works for a living looks upon it as a little miracle and

THE SACRED FLAME

can never believe that any other can be clever enough to do the same thing. I needn't have become a nurse, you know. I might have made hats or invented a face cream.

Nurse

Do you think this is the time to make cheap jokes?

Stella

I shouldn't have thought so. But you surely began when you accused me of poisoning my husband.

Nurse

Do you know what it means to work for one's living? Do you think one doesn't often feel tired and ill but goes on because it's one's job? Do you think one doesn't want to go and have fun like other girls? All your life you've been petted and spoiled and pampered. And you were going to have a child. How could you have worked?

Colin

You're really going too far, Miss Wayland. We can't stand here and let you insult Stella. The situation is preposterous.

Stella

There was Colin, you know, Miss Wayland. I don't think he would have left me in the lurch.

Colin

He certainly wouldn't.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

And what would you have had to go through before he could marry you? Not only exposure to your husband. But the divorce court. It wouldn't have been a very pretty case.

Stella

It would have been horrible.

Nurse

(*With a gesture towards COLIN.*) Do you think his love would have stood that test? Are you sure he wouldn't have hated you for the disgrace you had thrust upon him? Men are sensitive, you know, more sensitive than women, and they're afraid of scandal.

Stella

I may not be typical of my sex. I don't think I should like it either.

Nurse

(*With all the scorn of which she is capable.*) You don't have to tell me that. Why are you letting me stand here and talk as I'm talking, but that you think you can persuade me or bribe me into holding my tongue? Why haven't these men, who are your friends and who hate me, thrown me out? Because they're afraid of me. They're afraid of scandal. They're afraid of publicity. Is that true?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Very probably.

Nurse

And you're not only afraid of scandal, you're afraid of your neck.

Stella

No, that's not true.

Nurse

You were in a hopeless situation. There was only one way out of your difficulties. You know as well as I do that your treachery, your monstrous cruelty would have broken your husband's heart. You couldn't face that. You preferred to kill him.

Stella

You've known me for five years, Nurse Wayland. I don't know how you can think me capable of such wickedness.

Nurse

Your husband trusted and loved you. He was bed-ridden. He was defenceless. I know that if you'd had a spark of decent feeling you couldn't have treated him as you did. If you were capable of being unfaithful to him you were capable of killing him.

Mrs. Tabret

(*With her thin smile.*) Are you not falling into a rather vulgar error, my dear? I know that when people

THE SACRED FLAME

talk of a good woman they mean a chaste one, but isn't that a very narrow view of goodness? Chastity is a very excellent thing, but it isn't the whole of virtue. There's kindness and courage and consideration for others. I'm not sure if there isn't also humour and common sense.

Nurse

Are you defending her for having been untrue to your son?

Mrs. Tabret

I'm excusing her, Nurse Wayland. I know she gave Maurice all she could. The rest was not in her power.

Nurse

Oh, I know how you look upon these things. Nothing matters very much. There's no guilt in sin and no merit in virtue.

Mrs. Tabret

May I tell you a little story about myself? When I was still a young woman, with a husband and two children, I fell madly in love with a young officer who had charge of the police in my husband's district and he fell madly in love with me.

Liconda

Millie!

THE SACRED FLAME

Mrs. Tabret

I'm an old woman now and he's an elderly retired major. But in those days we were all the world to one another. I didn't yield to my love on account of my boys. It nearly broke my heart. Now, you know, I'm very glad I didn't. One recovers from the pain of love. When I look at that funny old-fashioned major now I wonder why he ever excited in me such turbulent emotions. I could have told Colin and Stella that in thirty years it wouldn't matter much if they'd resisted their love. But people don't learn from the experience of others.

Nurse

You resisted, you can always say that you clung to the right.

Mrs. Tabret

I think it was easier then, you know, for in that far-distant time we attached more importance to chastity than we do now. Yes, I resisted, but because I know the anguish it was, I feel I have the right to forgive those who were less virtuous, or perhaps only more courageous, than I.

Nurse

It is only by overcoming temptation that we strengthen our souls.

THE SACRED FLAME

Mrs. Tabret

Perhaps. But I've sometimes noticed that our most spectacular victories are over temptations that don't really tempt us very much. When I consider human nature and temptation I can't help thinking of a river and its banks. So long as too much water doesn't flow down between them the banks do their work very well, but let a flood come and they're useless. The river overflows and havoc follows.

Stella

Oh, my dear, you're so kind and so wise.

Mrs. Tabret

No, darling, I'm only so old.

Liconda

(*Kindly, but quite firmly.*) Stella, Miss Wayland's accusation is very definite and must be met.

Stella

Her accusation is absurd.

Liconda

If Maurice died of an overdose of chloral, it was administered by somebody.

Stella

I suppose so.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

Can you suggest anyone who had the slightest motive for wishing he was dead?

Stella

No.

Liconda

I'm sure you want to help us to get at the truth. You must forgive me if I ask you some embarrassing questions.

Stella

Of course.

Liconda

What did you propose to do when you discovered you were going to have a baby?

Stella

I was frightened. At first I couldn't believe it. I didn't know what to do.

Liconda

You were aware that it couldn't be concealed very long?

Stella

Naturally. I thought something would happen. I was distracted.

Liconda

Did you tell anyone?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

No, I was trying to screw up courage to ask Dr. Harvester what I had better do. I didn't mind for myself. It was Maurice I was thinking of.

Liconda

You must have had some plan.

Stella

Oli, a hundred. I thought of nothing else day and night. I tried to find out if there wasn't some place I could go to. I thought if the worst came to the worst I could get Dr. Harvester to say I was ill and run down and wanted a change and I could go away till the baby was born.

Liconda

I suppose you never thought of making a clean breast of it to Maurice.

Stella

No, never. It would have broken his heart. He would have forgiven me. He loved me so much. But I couldn't bear that he should lose that immense belief he had in me. It meant everything to him.

Liconda

You appear to have been the last person who saw him alive?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Yes, I went in to say good-night to him just before I went up to bed.

Liconda

What did you say to him then?

Stella

Nothing particular.

Liconda

Didn't you say that he'd been very much upset? He'd cried.

Stella

Yes. Earlier in the evening, before he went to bed.

Liconda

Why was he upset?

Stella

Need I tell you? It was so very private.

Liconda

No, of course not. I have no right to ask you anything. Only there is something very strange about the whole thing and for your own sake I think it would be better if you told us everything.

Stella

He broke down because he couldn't love me as he wanted to love me. He would have so liked to have a baby.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

And when you said good-night to him did he make no further reference to that?

Stella

No, none. He'd quite recovered. He was in perfectly good spirits again.

Liconda

What did he say?

Stella

He just asked me if we'd enjoyed our snack and then he said, you'd better get off to bed. I said, I'm simply dropping, and I kissed him and said, Good-night, old thing.

Liconda

How long were you in his room?

Stella

Five minutes.

Liconda

Did he say that he felt sleepy?

Stella

No.

Liconda

I suppose you knew where the chloralin was kept.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Vaguely. I knew that all his bottles and things were in the bathroom. He hated his bedroom to be littered about.

Liconda

Did he ask you for anything before you went?

Stella

No, there was nothing he wanted. Nurse Wayland had fixed him up quite comfortably.

Nurse

(*To STELLA freezingly.*) You don't understand. Major Liconda is giving you an opportunity of saying that your husband asked you for the chloralin and you, thinking no harm, gave it to him. You saw him take out five or six tabloids and then you replaced the bottle on the shelf.

Stella

(*With irony.*) I never thought of that. That would have been quite a good way out if I'd poisoned my husband. No, Major, Maurice never asked me for the chloralin and I never gave it to him.

Nurse

May I ask a question now?

Stella

Certainly.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

Why were you so upset when I came in this morning and told you I'd been into your husband's room?

Stella

Do you mean when you said he was dead? Did you expect me to go on eating an egg as though you'd said it was a fine day?

Nurse

No, you didn't know he was dead then. You couldn't have known unless you'd had second sight.

Stella

Oh, I see what you mean now. I was angry with you for going into his room before he was called. Sleep is such a precious and lovely thing. I think one should never wake anyone without reason.

Nurse

Are you sure you weren't afraid I'd gone into his room too soon? Supposing he'd been still alive and it had been possible to save him?

Stella

You've quite made up your mind that I murdered Maurice, haven't you?

Nurse

I'm not the only one.

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

What makes you think that?

Nurse

Why do you suppose the Major gave you that loophole by suggesting that your husband asked you to give him the tabloids?

Liconda

(*With some acerbity.*) You have done what you thought your duty, Miss Wayland. Well and good. If now you have other things to do, I don't think we need take up any more of your time.

Nurse

I'll go. There's nothing more for me to do here. I know you all hate me and you think I've done what I've done from unworthy motives. I started packing my things while you were having lunch. I shall be ready in ten minutes.

Mrs. Tabret

You must take your time, Nurse.

Nurse

Believe me, I'm just as anxious to leave this house as you are to get rid of me. I shall be grateful if I can have a taxi rung up.

Mrs. Tabret

Colin will get on to the rank. Perhaps you'd better get on at once, darling.

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

All right, Mother.

(He opens the door for the NURSE and follows her out. The others watch her go in silence. The door is closed.)

Mrs. Tabret

Poor Miss Wayland. She has right on her side, you know, and she feels like a criminal. One can't help feeling sorry for a girl who has so much virtue and so little charm.

Liconda

Might I speak to Stella alone for a minute?

Mrs. Tabret

If you wish to. Come with me, Dr. Harvester.

Harvester

With pleasure.

Mrs. Tabret

It's too bad that you should have to waste so much time on what is no business of yours.

Harvester

Believe me, I'd give a farm to be quite certain of that.

(They go out.)

Liconda

Stella, what are you going to do?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

I don't know. What can I do? I feel like a rat in a trap.

Liconda

It's obvious that the matter can't rest here. It can't be hushed up now.

Stella

What is going to happen, then?

Liconda

I suppose Dr. Harvester must communicate with the coroner. There'll be a post-mortem. If, as I'm afraid seems almost certain, Maurice is found to have died of an overdose of chloral there'll be an inquest and we shall have to await the verdict of the jury.

Stella

And then?

Liconda

If they find that poison was administered by a person unknown I imagine that the police will step in. I am afraid you must be prepared for a very terrible ordeal.

Stella

Do you mean that I should be tried for murder?

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

It might be that the Director of Public Prosecutions would think that there was insufficient evidence to justify him in instituting proceedings.

Stella

Whatever else I've done you must know that it's incredible that I can be guilty of such a monstrous crime.

Liconda

Let us get the facts quite straight. I'm afraid it's no good blinking them. You were going to have a child of which Maurice was not the father. You were desperately anxious that he shouldn't know of your condition.

Stella

Desperately.

Liconda

Something had happened between you that had greatly distressed him. You were the last person that saw him. He was allowed to sleep on in the morning as long as he could. You were very angry when you found the nurse had gone into his room. He was dead. Five tablets of chloralin are missing from the bottle and he couldn't possibly have got them himself. Who gave them to him?

Stella

How can I tell?

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

My dear, you know that I desire to help you. I am your friend. It's no good beating about the bush. You're in a frightful situation.

Stella

Do *you* think I'm guilty?

Liconda

Do you want the truth?

Stella

Yes.

Liconda

I don't know.

Stella

(*As though she were thinking it over.*) I see.

Liconda

Of course, it's only circumstantial, but it all hangs together pretty well. You can hardly be surprised if suspicion falls on you.

Stella

(*With a touch of humour.*) It hangs together beautifully. If I didn't know I hadn't poisoned Maurice I should say I must be guilty. There's only one thing I can say on the other side. I should have thought anyone who knew me at all would know I couldn't have poisoned Maurice.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

In the course of my career I've had to do with a lot of crime. To me one of the shattering things about it has been to notice that the most law-abiding and decent person may be driven to commit one. There are very few of us who can say that we shall certainly never do so. Sometimes crime seems to come to a man as accidentally as a chimney pot may fall on his head when he's walking down the street.

Stella

(*With a shudder.*) It's rather terrible.

Liconda

It's not my business to judge you. I can only feel the deepest sympathy for the dreadful position you are in. You know what we English are and how uncharitably we regard sexual delinquencies. A jury would be greatly prejudiced against you when they were told that you had committed adultery with your brother-in-law.

Stella

Poor Colin. He'll have to put up with a good deal, won't he?

Liconda

Do you love him very much?

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

I love him as I never loved Maurice. My love for Maurice was open and sunny. It seemed as natural as the air I breathe. I thought it would last forever. But in my love for Colin there is all my pain and my remorse and the bitterness of knowing that it's possible for love to die.

Liconda

Yes, that is bitter, isn't it? It makes life look such a sell.

Stella

Wouldn't it be possible in any way to keep Colin out of it?

Liconda

Oh, I'm afraid not. Anyhow that is a question we can discuss with the lawyers. We must find out who are the best people to go to. There's one thing I should like to impress upon you at once. Don't try to hide anything from your lawyers. The only chance an accused person has is to tell his advisers the absolute truth.

Stella

I have told the truth from the beginning.

Liconda

I hope to God you have.

(COLIN comes in. She sweeps up to him in a sudden storm of agitation.)

THE SACRED FLAME

Stella

Oh, Colin, you believe in me, don't you? You know I couldn't have done what they accuse me of.

Colin

(*Taking her in his arms.*) Darling. Darling.

Stella

Oh, Colin, I'm so frightened.

Colin

There's nothing to be frightened of. You're innocent. They can't touch you.

Stella

Whatever happens it means that we're finished. All our love is going to be told to everyone and they'll make us appear beastly and vicious. They'll say horrible things about me. They'll never know how hard I tried to resist. People blame you because you fall, they give you no credit for the effort you made to save yourself. The past counts for nothing.

Colin

It's so cruel that I who'd give my life for you should have brought all this misery on you.

Stella

How can I expect you to stay loving me when we've gone through what we've got to go through? Oh, the shame of it. Where should we go to hide our heads?

THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

I shall love you always. You're all the world to me.
You're all the world I want.

Stella

Men used to try to flirt with me. It meant so little, I only laughed at them. Until you came the thought never entered my head that I could be unfaithful to Maurice. I wasn't troubled. I just put all that side of life on one side and never thought of it. I never knew I loved you till it was too late.

Colin

The only thing I ask you is never to regret that you loved me, whatever happens.

Stella

No, I shall never do that. I can't.

Colin

(*With all his tenderness.*) Oh, my love. My sweetness.

Stella

But what a rotten trick fate has played on me. I look as though I were a bad, beastly woman, and when I look into my heart I can't see any wickedness. What a punishment because I couldn't resist the love that swept me up, as a gust of wind in March sweeps up last year's dead leaf.

‘THE SACRED FLAME

Colin

Whatever the punishment is we can bear it together. Let's take our medicine, Stella; whatever happens, they can't take us away from one another.

Stella

(*Desperately.*) Major Liconda, what are we to do? Can't you say something to help us?

Liconda,

(*Very gravely, in a low voice.*) How can I advise you? I can only tell you what I should do in your place.

Stella

What is that?

Liconda

If I were innocent I should stick it out. I should say to myself, I may have sinned, I don't know, the world says so and the world is my judge. Whatever I did, I did because I couldn't help it and I'm willing to put up with what is coming to me. But if I were guilty, if in a moment of terror or madness I had committed an act for which the punishment of the law is death, I wouldn't wait to let justice take its course. I would take the surest, quickest way to put myself beyond the reach of the law.

Stella

I am innocent.

THE SACRED FLAME

Liconda

If you hadn't been I should have told you that in the drawer of my writing-desk is a loaded revolver and that no one would prevent your going the few steps to my house and letting yourself in through the study window.

(STELLA looks at him in horror, fear making her heart beat furiously; he drops his eyes and turns his head away. There is a terrible silence. Then NURSE WAYLAND comes in. She wears now a coat and skirt and carries a hat in her hand. STELLA pulls herself together. She addresses the NURSE with relief. She is cool and urbane.)

Stella

You've been very quick, Nurse.

Nurse

I found I had practically nothing left to pack. I've asked Alice to have my trunk taken downstairs.

Stella

The gardener's here to-day. He can give her a hand.

Nurse

Might I say good-bye to Mrs. Tabret before I go?

Stella

I'm sure she'd like you to. She's in the garden.

THE SACRED FLAME

Nurse

I'll go to her.

Stella

Oh, don't bother. Colin will call her. She only went out because Major Liconda had something he wished to say to me in private.

(COLIN goes to the window and calls.)

Colin

Mother.

Mrs. Tabret

(From the garden). Are you calling me, Colin?

Colin

Nurse Wayland is just going. She would like to say good-bye to you.

Mrs. Tabret

I'll come.

(The four persons in the room stand in silence.

To all of them the moment is fateful. MRS.

TABRET comes in followed by DR. HARVESTER.)

Mrs. Tabret

(With a little smile as though nothing very serious had happened.) Is your taxi here, dear?

Nurse

Yes, I saw it drive up from my window. Mrs. Tabret, I couldn't go without thanking you for all your kindness to me during the five years I've lived here.

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Mrs. Tabret

My dear, you were never any trouble. It was never difficult to be kind to you.

Nurse

I'm dreadfully sorry to have to repay all you've done for me by bringing this confusion and unhappiness upon you. I know you must hate me. It seems frightful, but I do ask you to believe that I can't help myself.

Mrs. Tabret

Before we part, my dear, I should like if I could to release your spirit from the bitterness that is making you so unhappy. We're none of us all of a piece, you know. We haven't one self but half a dozen. That's why you're wrong to have been jealous of Stella. You gave Maurice everything that one self of him craved and that self of his was yours. It may be that we can be all things to all men, but can any of us be all things to one man, can any man be all things to any one of us? I knew a self of Maurice that none of you knew, I gave him something that no one else could give. I did not interfere with anyone. How ungenerous it would have been of me to resent the passion that bound him to Stella and the tender, comradely habit that bound him to you. God bless you for the kindness you

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showed my poor Maurice and for the unselfish love you bore him.

(She takes NURSE WAYLAND'S hands and kisses her on both cheeks.)

Nurse

(With a sob.) I'm so desperately unhappy.

Mrs. Tabret

Oh, my dear, you mustn't lose your admirable self-control. No one can make an omelette without breaking eggs. And such is the depravity of human nature, I suppose even the most respectable citizen feels a slight twinge of discomfort when he delivers the criminal to justice.

Liconda

I suppose you will leave an address, Miss Wayland. Dr. Harvester will communicate with the proper authorities and I have no doubt they will want to get into touch with you.

Harvester

I shall go and see the coroner and put the facts before him. Would you like to come with me, Nurse?

Nurse

No.

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Harvester

If Mrs. Tabret doesn't mind I'll ring up his place from here and find out if he's in.

Mrs. Tabret

Of course, I don't mind, but before you do that may I say a few words?

Harvester

As many as you like.

Mrs. Tabret

I'll try to be brief. Nurse Wayland is mistaken in thinking that Stella was the last person who saw Maurice alive. I saw him and spoke to him later.

Nurse

(*With utter amazement.*) You!

Harvester

But was he wide awake? If he'd taken thirty grains of chloralin he'd have been certainly very drowsy, if not comatose.

Mrs. Tabret

Wait a minute, Dr. Harvester. Let me tell you my story in my own way.

Harvester

I beg your pardon.

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Mrs. Tabret

You know that Maurice's room was just under mine. His windows were always wide open and when he couldn't sleep, and put on his light, I could see the reflection from my room. Then I used to slip down and sit by him and we'd put out the light and talk. Sometimes we talked about his childhood in India and I used to tell him of my own youth. But sometimes we'd talk about things that few men care to speak of in the broad light of day. He'd tell me of his great love for Stella and how anxious he was for her welfare and happiness. We'd talk of the mystery that surrounds the life of man. And often he would fall asleep and I stole softly away. We never mentioned these long conversations we had. (*With a little ironical smile.*) The position of a woman living in the same house with her son and her daughter-in-law is a trifle delicate and I didn't want Stella to think that I was in any way taking her place.

Stella

My dear, I wouldn't have grudged you anything.

Mrs. Tabret

There was no need to. But one shouldn't put human nature to too great a strain. The self that Maurice gave me during those long watches of the night was a self that only I, his mother, could respond

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to. . . . I couldn't sleep last night. There was no light in Maurice's room, but I felt strangely that he was lying awake, too. I went downstairs and into the garden and looked in at his window. He saw my shadow and said, Is that you mother? I thought you might come in.

Harvester

What time was that?

Mrs. Tabret

I don't know. Perhaps an hour after you'd left. He told me that he'd taken his sleeping-draught but it didn't seem to be having any effect. He said he felt awfully wide awake. And then he said, Mother, be a sport and give me another, it can't hurt just for once, and I do want to have a decent sleep.

Harvester

Somehow or other he was very nervous last night. I suppose his usual dose wasn't any good.

Mrs. Tabret

(*Very quietly.*) Very early after his accident I had promised Maurice that if life became intolerable to him I would give him the means of putting an end to it.

Stella

Oh, God!

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Mrs. Tabret

I said that if his sufferings were so great that he couldn't bear them any more and he solemnly asked me to help him, I wouldn't shirk the responsibility of giving him whatever drug was necessary to put to a painless end an existence he was no longer willing to endure. And sometimes he'd say to me, Does the promise still hold? And I answered, Yes, dear, it holds.

Stella

(*With the greatest agitation.*) Did he ask you last night?

Mrs. Tabret

No.

Liconda

What happened then?

Mrs. Tabret

I knew that Stella's love meant everything to Maurice and I knew that she had none to give him because she had given all her love to Colin. What do we any of us live for but our illusions and what can we ask of others but that they should allow us to keep them? It was an illusion that sustained poor Maurice in his sufferings, and if he lost it he lost everything. Stella had done as much for him as even I, his mother, could ask of her. I was not so selfish as to

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demand from her the sacrifice of all that makes a woman's life worth while.

Stella

Why didn't you give me the chance?

Mrs. Tabret

Years ago, when for my sons' sake I put aside the great love I bore to that funny old major standing there, I thought that no greater sacrifice could ever be asked of me. I know now it was nothing. For I loved Maurice. I adored him. I am so lonely now he is dead. It was a lovely dream that he dreamed, and I loved him too much to let him ever awake from it. I gave him life and I took life away from him.

Nurse

(*Horror-struck.*) Mrs. Tabret! It's impossible! How dreadful!

Liconda

Millie! Millie! What are you going to tell us?

Mrs. Tabret

I went into the bathroom and climbed on the chair and got the bottle of chloralin. I took five tabloids as you know, Nurse Wayland, and I dissolved them in a glass of water. I took it in to Maurice and he drank it at a gulp. But it was bitter; he mentioned it, and I

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suppose that's why he left a little at the bottom of the glass. I sat by the side of his bed holding his hand till he fell asleep, and when I withdrew my hand I knew it was a sleep from which he would never awake. He dreamed his dream to the end.

Stella

(*Taking her in her arms.*) Oh, Mother, Mother. What have you done? And what will be the end of this? Oh, I'm so terrified.

Mrs. Tabret

(*Gently releasing herself.*) My dear, don't bother about me. What I did I did deliberately and I am quite ready to put up with the consequences. I do not seek to shirk them.

Stella

It's my fault. It's my weakness. How can I ever forgive myself? What have I done?

Mrs. Tabret

You mustn't be silly and sentimental. You love Colin and Colin loves you. You mustn't think about me nor distress yourselves at what happens to me. You must go away and in America you can marry and have your child and you must forget the past and the dead. For you are young and the young have a right to life and the future belongs to them.

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Colin

Mother, darling. Oh, Mother, you make me so ashamed.

Mrs. Tabret

My son, I love you, too. I have your happiness very much at heart.

Liconda

Millie. My dear, dear Millie.

Mrs. Tabret

(With a slightly grim smile.) Well, Nurse Wayland, you see you were quite right. Of course, I ought to have replaced the tabloids by others, aspirin or chlorate of potash, but as you said just now murderers often make mistakes and I'm not an habitual criminal.

(There is a moment's pause.)

Nurse

Dr. Harvester, are you still willing to sign the death certificate?

Harvester

Yes.

Nurse

Then sign it. If there were ever any question I am prepared to swear that I left the tabloids on Maurice's table by his bed.

Stella

Nurse Wayland!

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Mrs. Tabret

(*To HARVESTER.*) Isn't it a dreadful risk you're taking?

Harvester

Damn it, I don't care.

Liconda

Oh, Nurse, we're so grateful to you, so infinitely grateful.

(*NURSE WAYLAND throws herself down on her knees and clasps MRS. TABRET in her arms.*)

Nurse

Oh, Mrs. Tabret, I've been so horrible. I've been petty and revengeful. I never knew how mean I was.

Mrs. Tabret

Come, come, my dear, don't let any of us get emotional. We are both of us lonely women now. Let us cleave to one another. So long as you and I can keep our love for Maurice alive in our hearts he is not entirely dead.

THE END



